



NICK CARTER

A KILLMASTER
SPY CHILLER

SPY CASTLE



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Version 0.9

Dedicated to The Men of the Secret Services of the United States of
America

Chapter 1

WARNING SHOT

Five o'clock Saturday morning, November 6, 1965.

The missile left its pad somewhere in the bleak, fog-shrouded islands off northeastern Scotland. It rose steadily on a pillar of fire, a massive metal cigar loaded, in this instance, with something even more dreadful than the atomic warhead. It carried a carefully calculated payload of terror!

The black volcanic rock of the island shuddered and melted as the blast lashed it, but most of the sound and fury was absorbed and covered by a November gale howling in from the northwest. The men who launched the rocket were counting on that!

The missile vanished into the murky overcast. It arched and bent into a long parabola as the gyroscope took over.

In a concrete blockhouse one of the men in white coats said, "It's a simple enough shot, really. Like dropping a marble in a rain barrel."

Another white coat glanced at his wrist. "Well, we should know in about four minutes."

A third man, speaking in a nasal Yankee accent, said: "Talk about the shot heard 'round the world! This is really it!"

The missile attained full speed. It gained its apogee and tilted downward, every sensitive device functioning perfectly. It began to nose for its target, the North Pole, like a well-trained hunting dog after a bird ...

Far below the penthouse, the traffic of New York was a diminishing symphony of taxis and buses and newsies and Broadway sounds drifting up forty floors to where Nick Carter battled a recurrent nightmare. He moved restlessly in his sleep, his great sleek muscles contracting spasmodically. Tiny bullets of sweat greased his clean cut features and trickled amid the hair on the massive chest. A stray shaft of neon-tinted light, leaking through heavy velvet draperies, illuminated the hard planes of his face. It was a classically handsome face and just now, by some trick of the light and shadow, the eyeless face of some nameless God on an ancient Greek coin. Without the eyes, which could hold warmth and humor when they chose, the face of Nicholas Huntington Carter was cold and stern, with just a hint of cruelty. The features of a tense and danger-inured Apollo, marred by the suffering of Apollyon. The stray beam of light, benign now in this

moment of sleep, did not show the razor-etched lines about the eyes and mouth ...

The missile was diving now, the force of gravity added to its own searing speed. The white desert glistened below, the ice-bound polar eye stared up at the terrible intruder about to blind it. The Arctic waste brooded and waited for the man-made flame that would free it, unlock it, transform it into watery steam ...

The nightmare conquered. Nick Carter started awake, gasping and sweating. He wiped away sweat and got up, his feet sliding into slippers. He shrugged into a robe and stood for a moment looking down at the sleeping girl. She was sleeping on her back, covered only to the waist, one slim arm flung across her perfect oval of a face. Her name was Melba O'Shaughnessy and she was from Dublin. Last night she had made her debut at the Metropolitan Opera, singing Musetta in *La Boheme*, and today all New York would be at her feet. She had taken twenty curtain calls. And Nick, an hour after meeting her at a party, had taken her! To his penthouse high atop one of the city's swank hotels ...

The missile penetrated deep into ice and exploded. Fifty megatons of savage fury was unloaded on top of a world that did not yet realize it had been struck. It was a pin-point hit—actual impact not more than a mile from the Pole—and for a radius of forty miles the ice cap melted and boiled ...

On an ice floe ninety miles to the south a party of U.S. Navy and West German scientists stared with awe at the fireball in the sky. One of the Germans combed ice from his beard with trembling fingers. "Mein Gott! The swine! Mein Gott—Mein Gott they've finally started it!"

A Navy scientist was faster thinking. He watched the now fading fireball as he squinted with narrowed eyes at a slide rule. "Let's not jump to conclusions," he warned his colleagues. He glanced at his slide rule again. "According to the gizmo here that was a direct hit on the Pole! How come? Why would they waste one on the Pole? It just doesn't figure—unless it's some kind of a warning. And they wouldn't warn us! No—there's something screwy in Denmark!" And he ran for the radio tent ...

Nick Carter, N3, holding rank of senior KELLMASTER in AXE, stood beside the bed and gazed down at the sleeping Melba O'Shaughnessy. He was about to draw the covers over her nude torso, then hesitated to admire her beauty. The loveliness he had so recently kissed and caressed and made love to.

She had magnificent breasts, had Melba. She was a deep-chested girl, fully developed as befitted an opera singer. It was not hard to see whence came the deep and pure tones about which the critics would

rave in today's papers.

Nick fancied himself as something of a connoisseur of breasts. Melba's were of the Celtic type—what else in a girl from Dublin?—half pear and half globe and hung low on the ribcage with nipples tilting high on the upper round of flesh. Velvety, satin-soft flesh, pink budded, with just a hint of blue vein tracery in marmoreal perfection. Soft-firm-hard-soft! Exquisite. They might have been carved from Carrara!

Nick smiled faintly now as he remembered their lovemaking. Melba was extremely sensitive and responsive. She had whimpered and sobbed with pleasure. It had been fine. Marvelous. First times usually were. And it had all happened so fast! A few glasses of champagne at the party, then he had asked her to leave the hot and noisy throng and come with him.

At first Melba had laughed at him, displaying stunning teeth in a moist red smile. "To the Casbah to see your etchings, no doubt? Sure and 'tis a fast worker you are, Mr. Carter!" Her voice, beautifully modulated, yet had the crispness of Dublin.

They both laughed at the weird dichotomy of old jokes. Nick said, "To my penthouse, m'cushla. Or, as I like to think of it, to my temporary playhouse."

Temporary it must be, of course. An agent for AXE, especially one bearing the rank of KILLMASTER, dared not live too long in one spot. It was an axiom in the service—to live at all you had to keep on the move, changing cloak for cloak, disguise for disguise, cover for new cover.

Now he added, "And sure and it's a fast world we live in these days. Tomorrow may never come." How sadly true! He finished his champagne.

The girl laughed. "Carpe diem?" There was a brightness of intelligence in her violet eyes. They sparkled at him like the champagne she was drinking.

"Something like that," Nick acknowledged. "But spare me the Latin, please. I never could pass it in school. I was always forgetting my pony. But if that means what I think it does then I'll go along with it—and translate it into good English—gather your rosebuds while ye may! I'm all for that!"

And you, sweetheart, he added to himself, are some rosebud!

Melba laughed again, a sound like the ripple of an Irish brook, and put a pink-nailed hand on Nick's sleeve. She was wearing a simple sheath of white and gold that revealed shoulders and upper breasts the color of fresh Dorsetshire cream.

Melba put her head back and studied him with half-closed eyes. Nick sensed that he had made it, that assent was trembling on the red

lips. She squeezed his muscular bicep. "Do you always rush your fences so—Nick?"

Nick grinned. "I guess I do. Shall we go?"

As they left he thought, not without grimness, that in his profession it was the hour you seized, not the day. It had been nearly a month now since the blue phone in the penthouse had rung and the dry voice of Delia Stokes—Hawk's private secretary in Washington—had requested him to "scramble, please."

It would come! Sooner or later the blue phone would ring and he would scramble and Hawk's cold voice would come over the wire. Sending him to God knows where. Oh, yes—the blue phone would ring! But not tonight—Nick hoped!

He kissed Melba O'Shaughnessy in the taxi and she responded with utter abandon. The road lay clear ahead. After the first round of kisses, as they paused for breath, she whispered to him. "I feel like a tart, you know. I'm not, really. I'm quite inexperienced at this sort of thing, and I know I shouldn't be so easy! But somehow, with you, it doesn't seem to matter! Oh, Nick, there's something about you that fair melts my heart!"

Melba was still asleep, her arm over her face, breathing lightly in some deep dream of peace. As Nick drew the covers over her he saw that a tiny smile of content moved her lips.

The weather was uniformly bad over Great Britain and the Continent. Rain, mixed with snow and sleet, and borne on a screaming nor'wester, plagued the capitals. Nevertheless the mail service, in London, Paris, Rome, and Bonn, was efficient and on time. In each city, at precisely eight o'clock, a registered letter was handed in to each Ministry. The letters were addressed personally to the Prime Minister, President, or Chancellor in question, and on the upper left-hand corner of each envelope was rubber-stamped the notation: TOP SECRET—UTMOST URGENT—CONTAINS MATERIAL RELATIVE TO POLAR ATOMIC EXPLOSION.

The letters, as well as the explosion, had been well and cunningly timed. It was the old Hitlerian technique—institute and disclose a daring move over the weekend, when the machinery of government is slowed nearly to a halt, and key personnel are dispersed. By the time high officials can be recalled from fishing or hunting, from drinking sprees, or weekends with grandchildren, or some old fashioned lovemaking, and parliaments can be assembled in the democratic manner, it is too late! They are faced with a *fait accompli*!

Hitler used this technique with great success. Now another terrible and cunning mind was using it—a mind that had only contempt for Hitler because he had failed! This mind, this brain which esteemed itself far superior to any other mortal, signed itself with a single word.

A flourishing sounding word. A word bearing the panache of centuries of Celtic history. The signature at the bottom of every letter, in great round script done in red ink, was—PENDRAGON!

By the time the letters were received the Ministries of the West, as well as the Kremlin, were in a state of near nervous collapse. The day was murky and dour, and lights burned long in the White House, the Kremlin, and in 10 Downing Street and Paris and Rome and Bonn. Everywhere there was feverish activity. Phones and teletypes were red hot.

The President of the United States, over the hot line, assured the acting Premier of the Soviet Union: the U.S. had not dropped the bomb on the Pole. The Premier was equally convincing in his assertions that the Soviet Union was not to blame. Who then?

The British? French? Italians? West Germans? Preposterous! Unthinkable that any of them could be guilty. The French were barely started on an atomic buildup. Italy and West Germany didn't even have a bomb, much less a missile capable of delivering it to the Pole!

But who then? What in hell was going on this dull gray November morn?

The President and the Premier spoke in tones of desperate urgency, each trying to convince the other, each knowing that the world was hovering on the brink of total atomic war! Both men, though perhaps for different reasons, were desperate for peace. At last a tentative agreement was reached—wait and see what developed.

It was about this time that the fateful letters were delivered. No letter was sent either to the United States or Russia!

Immediately upon reading his letter the Prime Minister of Great Britain got through to the President of the United States. After a frantic and hurried exchange, during which the line to Moscow was kept open, a party line setup was put into action and Paris, Rome, and Bonn came on the line. Luckily all participants in the fateful conversation spoke English, so there was no delay for interpreters.

Ten minutes later matters were a great deal clearer. The chiefs of the six most important nations in the world breathed a little easier. It was not, as they had feared, the midnight of civilization. It was only a quarter of midnight! They had a little time!

Very little. The letters were most explicit. They had exactly one week to comply with the demands put forth in the letters. Pendragon had spoken!

There is always a leak to the Press, and this time was no exception. Newspapers around the world emblazoned the bare fact of a mysterious atomic explosion at the North Pole. That was all they knew, all they could print, and there they left millions of readers hanging. By common consent the iron curtain of censorship clamped

down. Even in England and the United States the censorship was total. After the flaring headlines—nothing. The rest was silence!

A hundred agencies, trained and equipped to handle just such disasters, went to work. Thousands of men and women the world over were alerted and drawn into the fight!

Pendragon sat in the midst of his web and fingered the trump he held and smiled and smiled ...

Nick Carter mixed himself a very light scotch and took it out on the dark terrace. Melba was still sleeping, still with the enigmatic little smile on her lovely face. Nick lit one of his very special long cigarettes—king-king size, of Lata-kia, perique, and Virginia—with a gold embossed NC on them. It was one of his few ostentations and he enjoyed smoking them when he was at home. He never took them with him on a mission—they would be a dead giveaway. Now he drew deeply at the fragrant tobacco, closed the French doors behind him, and pulled the robe about his throat against the chill. A light rain was falling, greasing the mosaic floor of the little terrace, and first light was still an hour or so away. Unmindful of the rain, Nick went to a stone baluster and stood peering down forty floors at the glistening black canyon of 46th Street.

Neon signs splotched the shiny pavement with varicolored iridescence, like oil stains spreading on ebony water. The usual early morning traffic flowed like a skimpy, disjointed metal snake. Trucks and night hawk taxis predominated, their sound muted by rain and mist. A tug growled hoarsely somewhere on the East River. Nick reflected idly that in New York there was always traffic, always noise. To his right a few lights glowed fuzzily high in the U.N. Building and he wondered. Surely it was a little late for cleaning people?

A chill breeze whipped at his ankles and rain damped his flesh. He sipped at the scotch and took a drag from the long cigarette. There would be no more sleep for him. Once he was as wide awake as this—well, he knew what he could do! What he intended to do. Waste not the shining hour!

He went back into the bedroom and rolled in beside Melba and kissed those parted red lips.

She came awake slowly, dragged from the depths of sleep to the slow, perhaps reluctant, renewal of life. To the realization of who and what she was, and where she was. For a moment she was frightened and strained away from him

Nick held her close and kissed her ear. “Don’t be afraid, honey! It’s only Nick.” He chuckled. “Don’t you remember me?”

For another moment she struggled against his strong embrace, fluttering like a trapped bird, then she understood and all her softness melded into his lean, tough fleshed body. Her lips sought his as she

gave a little murmur of recognition and assent. Her pink tongue flicked a good morning kiss, her breath sweet and clean. She strained hard against him, her arms creeping about his neck, her firm pale breasts mashed against the concrete barrel of his chest.

Nick let his fingers trickle down the smooth column of her spine. Melba wriggled and gasped, "Nick! Oh, Nick, what a lovely way to wake up!"

They kissed again. A long kiss. Finally Melba came up for air, still clinging to him. "Nick! Darling! I was dreaming about you—about how—how lovely you were to me last night! I'll never forget it. Never! Or you!"

He kissed her again and their tongues renewed old acquaintance and finally Nick whispered, "It's a bit early to think of forgetting, Melba. Or not forgetting! We've only just begun!"

She pulled her head back to stare at him with half narrowed eyes that were more green than violet in the dim morning light. "Have we now? Indeed? I would like to believe that, Nickie, darling, but somehow I can't. I just can't! You're a strange man, Nick. Very dear, but strange! And I've the terrible feeling we'll not see much more of each other after today."

"You've got the failing of the Irish," said Nick as he pulled her back to him. "You talk too much!"

But as he began the sweet, soft preliminaries of love making he knew she was right. Nick increased the tempo of his love making. Subtly at first, then with demand, even a little roughly without ever being brutal. He demanded and he took! Love before killing, he thought sardonically. How sweet it is! Seize the day? Indeed—seize the hour. Seize the minute. Seize the second. Seize the micro-second!

The big bed was a battlefield now as he and Melba struggled in tender fury. She gave as good as she got and her gaspings and pantings were muted little battle cries of anguished joy.

That goddamned blue phone, that blue damned phone, was going to ring! It would! As sure as his boss, Hawk, had eyes like two cold and dry martinis and chewed crackling dry and stale unlit cigars that goddamned blue phone was going to ring! But not yet! Not now! Not yet!

Melba O'Shaughnessy, in frenzy now, had thrown her arching white limbs over Nick and was attacking with zeal, fervent in the headlong pursuit of her pleasure and his, gasping and crying and sliding long moist red kisses across his face. Her face was contorted with pleasure as she gazed down at him, her facial muscles gone lax, her mouth open in a round scarlet O of ecstasy and her firm breasts now soft and melting with desire. They thrilled and convulsed at the same instant of timeless time! Melba shattered and broke and fell

away from Nick like a glass doll smashed to shards. He lay panting, mindless, his body made of cotton wool without weight or substance.

In another room a phone rang.

Neither of them stirred. Melba lay face down beside him, her face buried in the pillow. Nick stared at the ceiling, unable to move. Good timing, he thought with wry anger. Excellent timing, Hawk. I wish I could tell you how good. I wish I had the rank to do that!

In the other room the phone cried on, lonesome and metallic and determined. Melba stirred. She opened one eye and stared at the silent black phone on the bedside table. An extension. "It isn't this phone," she said quite unnecessarily.

Still Nick did not move. "I know—I know! In the other room. I'll get it in a minute."

Melba propped herself on an elbow and regarded him. "Isn't this sort of an ungodly hour for anyone to be calling? It wouldn't by any chance be another woman, darling?"

Nick groaned and rolled out of bed. "Not by any chance," he assured her. He paused to light one of his long cigarettes. The phone rang on. Melba said that he had better hurry or they would hang up.

Nick grinned at that. "They won't hang up," he said. "And they won't go away. The Irish aren't the only ones with second sight, you know. I'm the seventh son of a seventh son and I was born with a caul! I know who it is."

Melba snuggled down into bed and pulled the covers over her delicious breasts. "You're a strange lad, Nicholas Carter. Now go answer your phone and hurry back to me."

He went into the other room and picked up the blue phone. "Carter here."

Delia Stokes' crisp old-maidish voice came over the wire. "Washington calling, N3. Code Doomsday and EOW. I repeat—Doomsday and EOW! Please scramble."

A cold prickle of excitement and anticipation raced through Nick Carter. Codes Doomsday and EOW joined. EOW—End of the World!

It was the highest priority danger signal AXE had. Never before had he known it to be used. Doomsday and EOW joined! The world had to be on the verge of falling apart for Hawk to use that one! "Go ahead," he told Washington. "I'm scrambling."

Chapter 2

DEAD MAN'S BOOTS

Three hours later Nick Carter was in Washington, D. C., in the barren little office of his chief, Hawk. Outside, on Dupont Circle, the November day was drab and drear, with rain and occasional light snow. Inside, behind the innocent facade of the Amalgamated Press and Wire Service, the atmosphere of AXE HQ was as bleak as the weather. Nick had never before seen Hawk looking so grim.

Now, crunching angrily on an unlit cigar, Hawk introduced Nick to a tall, bald-headed man wearing crumpled salt and pepper tweeds.

"Nick, this is Mr. Ian Travers. Scotland Yard. Special Branch. He had to fly the Atlantic and he got here before you did—what kept you, anyway?"

Nick, shaking hands with Ian Travers, forebore to mention the usual New York morning traffic jam and that he had been going against prevailing traffic, trying to get to LaGuardia and the waiting AXE plane. Instead he mumbled something noncommittal and appraised both Ian Travers' handshake and the man himself. He warmed to both. The hand was firm and rough and dry. Travers was big and broad, with a florid complexion and steel-blue eyes, a trifle protuberant. He appraised Nick with the same frank curiosity.

Travers, as though in mitigation, spoke in an upper-class, educated English voice. "I had a little advantage, sir. I had my orders first, you know, and then they laid on one of the Delta wing X jobs for me. They do over two thousand, you know. I was no more than strapped in before I was getting out at the airport here!" Nick had to smile as he found a chair and arranged his long legs. The world might be coming to an end, but trust the British to be formal and polite! But he liked Ian Travers instinctively, at first sight. He would probably be a good man to work with. He didn't trust him yet. Nick trusted no one, with the possible exception of Hawk. And himself!

Hawk pointed a chewed cigar at Nick. "You will sit and listen, N3. Travers and I will do most of the talking. He has full clearance and knows everything we know—more, probably. There will be no time for a formal briefing. When you leave here you will have one hour to get ready, collect what you need, and then you'll be flown to where a U. S. destroyer is waiting between the Shetlands and the Orkneys. You'll parachute into the sea and the destroyer, the *Orestes*, will pick you up. The destroyer has a small sailing craft aboard, a 32-foot yawl,

and they'll put you over the side in her—you are a good small craft sailor, aren't you? I seem to remember that you are, and your dossier confirms it."

Nick admitted that he was a passable sailor. Ian Travers, who had found a chair and was stuffing rough cut into an ancient briar pipe, said: "You had better be more than passable, Nick. There's a gale blowing in those waters at the moment. And that can be a very nasty bit of sea. We'd bate to have you drown before you can get ashore and make vour contact. If you can make it, that is." Travers sounded gloomy and doubtful.

Nick said, "I'd sort of hate that myself—drowning, I mean. I'll try not to. Please go on, sir." He looked expectantly at Hawk. "I'd like a little more background on this thing, sir. So far I'm completely in the dark—all I know is that this is a Doomsday and EOW! So when does the world start blowing up, sir, and what am I supposed to do about it?"

Hawk tossed his thoroughly chewed cigar into the waste-basket and reached for a new one. "I said there is no time for the usual briefing in depth." Ian Travers leaned forward in his chair, holding a match to his pipe. "I think we might give him the bare bones, sir." He glanced at a watch on his thick, hairy wrist. "We've that much time before the plane leaves. Just!"

Hawk scowled, then sat back in his chair. "All right. Go ahead, Travers. But make it fast."

In succinct, well bred tones Ian Travers told Nick of the letters handed in that morning at the various Ministries of the Western world. None to Washington or Moscow, yet they were as deeply involved as the lesser powers. Travers detailed the threats contained in the notes and Nick felt a coldness stealing over him. Doomsday and EOW codes certainly seemed to be justified!

"This Pendragon," he interrupted, "you don't know who he is? He sounds like a madman!"

Ian Travers shook his head in sorrow and deprecation. He rapped his pipe on an ashtray. "But we do know who he is," he admitted. "Or we're so certain it doesn't matter. But he's been as clever as sin and has led us very neatly down the garden path—he's managed to completely mask his true objectives until now. We even know, to within a few degrees, at least, the location of the missile complex that sent the bomb to the Pole this morning! And we can't do a damned thing about it!"

Nick Carter said that he would be damned if he understood at all! If they knew who this crazy bastard was— then why didn't they just move in and destroy him? With the entire British Army, if necessary?

Travers' smile was wan and without mirth. He struck another

match and puffed futilely at a pipe which refused to draw. "It just isn't as simple as that," he said. "This bastard, as you call him, has got us by the short hairs at the moment. His letters made it very plain that he has other missiles, other atom bombs, ready to go at a moment's warning. He'll release them the moment we make a move against him. He threatens—and we know he means it—to bomb out London, Paris, Moscow, Rome, and Bonn if we dare take the slightest action! So calling out the Army and the Navy and the Marines isn't going to do us the slightest bit of good! It would only precipitate matters! As it stands now we've got a week to come up with something!"

An unlit cigarette dangled from Nick's lips. He leaned toward Travers. "Just who is this Pendragon?"

"Cecil Graves Lord Hardesty—you may have heard or read of him? He's the richest man in the world—I guess you can say that he owns part of everything of any value in the world! Oil, timber, uranium, newspapers, movies, the lot. You name it and the chances are that he owns it, or at least controls it. And now he wants to control, to run, the Western powers! Objective—to destroy Russia! Once he gains power, as he fully expects to do, he is going to unleash a massive atomic attack on the Russians!"

Nick Carter's highly trained and razor sharp mind saw the terrible implication immediately. "My God," he said slowly. "Do the Russians know this yet?"

Hawk took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "Not yet. If they did the bombs would probably be falling now! But everybody used their heads, for once, and that part of the notes was kept from the Ivans. For how long we can only guess—and pray! Because once they know about it, once they are convinced of Pendragon's true motives, they'll try to act first. Destroy us before we, or Pendragon, can destroy them! You can see, Nick, my boy, what you're up against! Travers just said it—armies are no good! It's a job for one man—two at the most! You've got to find this Pendragon, Lord Hardesty, and either take him into custody or kill him. More than that—you've got to smash his organization so completely that we can show the Russians there is no longer a threat! And you've got one week to do it in!"

Nick thought it all sounded very complex and quite impossible. He said as much. Ian Travers grinned sourly and said, "I know. Maybe you can't do it—but a drowning man clutches at straws, you know. So do drowning countries. And unless you can find Lord Hardesty, Pendragon, and kill him—I don't think we need to pretend among the three of us—then the whole world is going down together. We are all, quite literally, in the same boat!"

Nick became practical. "So you know who Pendragon is, but you don't know where he is? Obviously not, or you would have him."

Travers nodded assent. "He dropped out of sight a couple of weeks ago. No sign of him since. No sign of his wife, either. That would be Lady Hardesty." A strange look came over the Englishman's face. "Surely you have read of her—of Lady Hardesty?"

Nick glanced at Hawk. His chief was looking strangely embarrassed and Nick chuckled; even in this moment of tense decision Hawk was a little on the prudish side.

"I've read about her," Nick admitted. "I've read quite a lot about her. But I thought he divorced her, after that last scandal! She's got quite a reputation, hasn't she?"

"Lady Hardesty is a nymphomaniac to end all nymphomaniacs," said Travers bluntly. "A most beautiful woman. Still quite young. And Lord Hardesty did divorce her— then he married her again, though it's not generally known yet. God knows why, after what she put him through, but he did. Maybe she will turn out to be his weakness, his Achilles' heel. God knows we could use some such break! But as matters stand now they've both dropped completely out of sight. None of our agents have been able to find out a thing—and we've lost three men, mysteriously dead, in the past few weeks. Two of them were high privilege men—Double Os—meaning they were licensed to kill. Well, they got killed!"

Travers stopped thumbing tobacco into his pipe long enough to stare at Nick. "Might as well be frank with you, old man. We're desperate. Our Secret Service is up against the proverbial brick wall. They've only one Double O man left and he's in Scotland now with another agent, a woman, trying to break through Pendragon's ring. That's why we've come to you people for help! It's hands across the sea again, and all that. Our PM talked to your President and then I was sent over this morning—"

Hawk nodded at Nick. "The President called me personally and asked for our best man. I called you, naturally."

Nick Carter nodded. False modesty was not one of his failings. But this looked like a mean one. The stakes were higher than in any game he had ever played before.

He had a million questions, but they only let him ask a few. The rest could wait until the mission was under way. Travers pulled a battered map from his pocket and spread it on Hawk's desk. His blunt finger drew a circle around the area midway between the Orkney and the Shetland Islands.

"Just about here," the finger tapped the map, "a little northeast of Sanday, there is an island called Blackscape. Too small to be shown on this map, though it's quite good sized. Probably about three miles long by a mile wide at the greatest point. A few years ago Lord Hardesty, he's a Scotsman and they call him the Laird around there—a few years

ago he built a model fish cannery there for the folk. It cost him millions and he got a lot of publicity, naturally. Most of it in his own newspaper, the London Daily Proconsul, but nevertheless it was quite a do! Big philanthropic thing and all that. He even built model apartments for the workers and fishermen, since they all had to come from the mainland. He really laid it on, did the Laird. Movies, dance hall, coffee shops, the works. Since Blackscape is quite a distance from the mainland, and the weather is usually foul, the cannery workers had to sign on for a six month period.”

“Sort of captive workers?” It was Hawk chewing on still another fresh cigar.

Travers nodded. “In a way, I suppose. Though we don’t know just how much the workers themselves are involved in this thing—in the real purpose behind building the cannery. The missile complex, the silos and all that, must be entirely beneath the island, built into the hard black rock.”

Nick stared down at the map. “You’re positive the missile that hit the Pole came from this island?”

Travers grinned weakly. “As sure as men can be of anything. Every detection device we’ve checked says so— and Pendragon isn’t making any secret of it. He doesn’t care if we know—not this late in the game! He prefers that we know, I imagine. Makes him look pretty sleek and cunning, to have actually gotten away with such a thing! Now, of course, as of this morning, we’re forbidden to fly over the area. So we can’t bomb him! He’s got his own radar and at the first threat he’ll let the missiles go. Anyway there are the cannery people, the workers, who may or may not be innocent victims. We would have to destroy them also.”

“They aren’t in a very good spot,” Nick said. His tones were cold. “It might be that we’ll have to forget about them —find them expendable—if we can find a way of getting to the missile complex in time to stop this nut.”

Travers gave Nick a long look. “Yes,” he said sadly. “We’ve thought of that, too. A hard decision. But the workers may have to go if we can get through in time. But that’s all academic now. Look here on the map.” With a pencil borrowed from Hawk he drew a perimeter across the base of a peninsula jutting northeast into the North Sea.

“Just here,” explained Travers, “from Dingwall to Inverness, is where Pendragon has drawn the line. No troops or concentrations of police can cross it without sending up the balloon. No planes, of course. Also no subs allowed, nor any warships. You can see how he has managed to seal off Blackscape completely. If we gamble and go for him anyway—then we stand a good chance of failure and the price of failure is the world!”

He folded the map and put it back in his pocket. "You see the odds you're up against, Carter. One man might do it—just might. As I say we've gotten a couple of agents across the line, into Pendragon country, you might say, but we don't expect much from them. They're in there more to help you than anything else. And they're waiting for you now."

Nick smiled at Hawk. "I suppose you've got a cover all worked out for me, sir?"

Hawk nodded grimly. "I have. We got a break on that, at least. The Coast Guard found a dead man at sea the other day, and luckily the papers haven't gotten it yet. His name was James Ward-Simmons and he was an Englishman, so you'd better practice your accent."

"Wizard," said Nick Carter. "Jolly good show, don't you know. But do you mind telling me just what sort of a chap he was—and how he came to die? When I take over another man's life—or death—I like to know those little things."

"He was a writer," said Hawk. "A travel writer and sailor and adventurer. The Coast Guard says he probably died of a heart attack. Had been dead for some days when they found his yawl drifting off the Florida Keys. He was pretty well known, I guess, because they found half a dozen scrapbooks full of clippings. Also his own books on a shelf. You'll have to do some reading to play the part."

"Do I look like him?" Nick left his chair and paced the room. Hawk studied him. Ian Travers looked at his watch and looked impatient.

"Not bad," Hawk admitted. "Height and general build about the same. He was a few years older. And you'll need a goatee and a little more belly and some gray at the temples—"

"I'll probably come by that naturally," Nick said wryly. "If this mission turns out to be half as tough as it sounds."

Ian Travers glanced at his watch again. "You probably will," he concurred. "If you live to be a hundred, Nick, you'll never have a more dangerous and important case than this, I'm afraid. But now we had better get cracking. The plane has orders not to wait. I'll fly with you as far as Iceland and fill you in on the rest of this weird mess. Then I'm back to London. So we'll have to make all our arrangements between here and Reykjavik. Oh, and you may as well know now—I'm your control on this mission! You're to be controlled from London."

Nick glanced at Hawk. The older man nodded. "That's right, son. You're on lend-lease to the British as of now. Of course I'll expect reports when and if it's possible. Now do like the man says and get cracking. One hour. I suggest you visit Makeup first. See if they've got a graying goatee in your size,"

They shook hands. Hawk's hand was firm and dry, but Nick thought he detected just the slightest tremor. Hawk nervous? It was

indeed the end of the world.

An hour later, as Nick and Ian Travers were boarding the British Delta X, Nick asked a question of his companion. "Do you really think this Pendragon, this Lord Hardesty, will be hanging around Blackscape Island?"

Travers gave him a long cool stare before he answered. "I thought that would occur to you. No, we don't expect he will be. He won't take even the slightest chance. He's gone to ground in some safe place until this is over. But we must get a man into Blackscape! It was our thought that perhaps, somehow, those missiles could be blown up on their pads."

Nick nodded. "I see. And the saboteur—the man who blows them?"

It was Ian Travers' turn to nod. "Yes," he said. "He'll go too."

Chapter 3

FANGS OF THURSO

Sailor, Nick Carter told himself, you are earning your danger money tonight!

The gale had proved the betrayer, that and the fact that the Captain of the destroyer *Orestes*—on orders from Washington—had not made the anticipated easting. Nick was to have been put overboard in the yawl off Dunnet Head. From there it would have been a reasonable sail to the Cove of Stroma, where he was to rendezvous with the British agents. Instead, fearful of *Pendragon's* radar, the *Orestes* had dropped him fifty miles to the west!

But the November gale was the true tyrant! When Nick parachuted into the sea near *Orestes* the seas were comparatively calm, and the gale showed every promise of veering on around and up into the Norwegian Sea; instead, fickle as a woman, it backed a point or so and came on with renewed fury. At the moment, Nick estimated, it was blowing at Force Seven!

The *Cynara*, no matter how stout her heart of pine and birch and juniper wood, had not been built to live in such seas as were chasing her now. And she was old! As was the little Gray & Timken engine, straining and pounding now like a valiant old metal heart to keep living. Every time the engine faltered Nick's breathing did the same! He was a superb swimmer, and he was wearing a life jacket, but not even he could live in seas like these. But there was no help for it. His cover was that he was James Ward-Simmons, an English adventurer and writer—and the *Cynara* was Ward-Simmons' boat. He was wearing the dead man's sea boots too, and his pea-jacket and sweater-cap.

He might, Nick thought a trifle grimly as he strove to light a damp cigarette, even be meeting Mr. Ward-Simmons in person before long! He tossed the cigarette away in disgust and clung to the bucking wheel. It took all of his great strength to hold the *Cynara* on course. Nick's grin was slow and dour, and in the faint glow of the binnacle had a death's head quality as he remembered Hawk's advice to read some of the dead man's books! N3's laugh was harsh and explosive! Sure—just lash the old tiller and settle down for a nice cup of tea and an evening with a good book. Good show, what!

The *Cynara* felt the roiling green thunder of the seas under her stern. She trembled like a woman about to be raped. The following

seas, great masses of foam-flecked murder, moving at greater speed than she was, ran under the Cynara, lifted her, flung her forward to bury her nose in a smother of spray left by the wave ahead.

He was being carried due east. The rub—and what a rub it was—was that soon now, very soon, he was going to have to make some southing! Or otherwise be blown right on to pile up on the Orkneys. Southing! Nick's great thews strained as he fought the wheel and tried to stay on his feet and read the compass all at the same time. Southing, indeed! As it was the gale was trying to push him north, as well as east!

Yet when the time came he would have to try. He was not sanguine. When he had told Hawk—or had Hawk told him?—that he was a good small craft sailor he had not meant in an old boat with an ancient auxiliary, in a Force Seven gale!

But what alternative? There was no one else! Nothing else! Only Nick Carter, N3, Senior Ranking KILLMASTER! The British were licked, their best agents blown or dead! While Pendragon waited for his answer!

There were, of course, the two Limey agents waiting for him now in the Cove of Stroma, but they were to be under his orders and Ian Travers had not appeared to have much faith in them, except as they could assist Nick. Travers had done all the talking on the brief flight to Reykjavik and Nick had listened with a sinking heart and a growing sense of numbness. For just a moment, there somewhere above the clouds, his heart had faltered! It seemed hard that one man must be called on to save the world from atomic lire!

It was pitch dark in the tiny cabin except for the soft glow of the binnacle. The lone man standing there fighting the wheel, seeming by his own spirit alone to hold the tiny craft together against the fury of the elements, the lone man appeared to slump for a moment. His shoulders bent. He could see nothing but the binnacle, hear nothing but the death cry of the gale. A mountain of water moved over the Cynara, green-fanged and deadly, larger than any before, and the man stood in the torrent and held the wheel steady. The glass of the miniature deckhouse smashed into a million shards. Tons of water roared over the frail craft. Somehow the old engine held firm and the propeller moved and the Cynara emerged from the smother and shook herself a little proudly.

Cynara plunged on.

N3 glanced to starboard then and saw it—the agreed signal. Three flaming crosses burning on the black rocks of the Cove of Stroma! They were burning a lot of crosses in Scotland these days, so it was thought that this signal should not be too much noticed. Travers had said that Pendragon had his patrols scouring the shore lines of the

interdicted area, so the crosses would have to be burnt low in the cove. This would also protect them from the gale. They—they being Washington and Downing Street—also thought that Cynara being so small, would be able to creep in under Pendragon's radar screen!

And now the Fangs of Thurso! Tall, sharp black needles of rock guarding most of the approach to the cove. Pendragon's patrols, if indeed there were any, would not bother with Stroma because of the Fangs. They were an almost impassable barrier even in fair weather. In a gale they were sure black lances of death!

Nick grinned, and as he felt his stiff, cold, salt-caked skin crack, he knew it was all right! The old Nick was back again! Old Nick—looking for some Hell to raise!

Now! He must make his turn, his southing, now or he would be carried past! His hands caressed the wheel. "Come on, honey," he told the Cynara. "Come on now, sweetheart! You've been a good brave girl this far—now just a little more for Nick, huh?"

Straining, gasping, slipping! With every great muscle corded in agony, with all his two-hundred plus pounds off the deck and hanging on the wheel, he brought the Cynara's head around against the full brunt of the gale! In that fleeting instant of time Nick Carter was fighting, single handed, a primeval force greater than all the atom bombs ever made!

The little craft screamed in torment! The weight of the wind increased a thousand fold and struck her broadside on, screeching like a million demented banshees. Trillions of tons of water lashed at her.

But she came about!

Nick rode a wheel that was like a bucking steer. The little engine died with a metallic groan. Suddenly there was no way on her and Nick was clinging to the wheel not to steer, but to keep from going over the side. The Cynara was swept along, half over, like a dying beetle in a rushing millrace.

The Cynara went completely over. Turned turtle! And, so great was the force propelling her, she bobbed up again! Right side up! Nick could breathe again, released for a precious moment from the cold green prison that had so nearly closed on him forever. The deck house had gone. He was clinging to the wheel column alone, and that was going. Behind him, gathering now, was the biggest, meanest, ugliest and greenest wave he had ever seen!

Just ahead, reaching for him, were the Fangs of Thurso! Waiting! Gleaming black. Smothered in raging foam. Grim black reapers of rocks—waiting for the gallant Cynara!

The huge wave took the little boat down the fence of jagged rocks like a stick against a picket fence. Nick felt her disintegrating under his feet. He caught one glance of the three crosses still burning deep

within the cove.

“Goodbye, girl,” Nick said. He went over the side. He went as deep as he could. Not trying to swim. No use trying to swim now. He was in the hands of whatever personal and private Gods had taken him safely through life thus far. Had preserved that life—and let him do his job!

As N3 drifted deep below the surface of the gale he felt an odd sense of relaxation, almost of quietude. He had done all mortal man could do—now if he was to be ripped to bits on the Fangs there would be no shame, no regret about it. He had torn his guts out and had held nothing back. He—

Nick had gotten caught in a tricky whirlpool spinning in the cove, and now it spun him to the surface. Not fifty feet from the black sand and shingle and looming cliff face. He struck out for it, swimming strongly. It was amazing, he thought, that he could even move. He was stunned and blunted and bloody and ripped and broken—no, not broken! Just badly bent.

It was awesomely quiet in the little cove after the din of the gale. The silence was not really that, of course, but in relation to the hellish din smashing past the cove entrance it was like a library. The waves in the cove were tiny bath tub waves for kids—only about six feet high!

One of the gentle little six feet high waves seized Nick now and tossed him, most ungently, onto a narrow triangle of black sand and gravel that punched back between two towering wind riven rocks.

“Thank you,” Nick murmured. “I’ll crawl the rest of the way, if you don’t mind.”

On his hands and knees he made it back into the ever narrowing little triangle until he was out of the reach of the waves. Then he collapsed, face on the shingle, arms out-flung. He moved not a muscle. Only the motion of his powerful chest told that he was alive at all.

Almost immediately he heard the mermaid singing. He groaned inwardly. Damn and double-damn! They give you no rest, these women. Even here in this place! Even when a man is nearly dead!

He groaned into the cold sand. “Go home, mermaid!”

But the mermaid sang, sweetly, in a voice that had just a hint of a Scots burr: “For there is good news yet to hear and fine things to be seen—”

The sweet, burred soprano stopped, ending on an upward and inquiring note. Nick tried to raise himself, then forgot it. He slumped back onto his cold sand pallet. In a minute, he thought. In a minute I’ll be up and doing. But just a minute—

It came again, from somewhere over his head. “For there is good news yet to hear and fine things to be seen—?”

Memory came ringing back. Travers, on the plane on the way to Iceland—a recognition code had been set up. Improvised on the spot.

Ian Travers was a great reader of poetry!

Nick took his face out of the dank black sand once more. Like a fighter that knows he has to get off the canvas. Suppose he couldn't remember the damned thing? He sat up and started squeezing water out of his pea-jacket, thinking madly. How did the rest of that damned thing go?

The hidden mermaid, perched somewhere on her rock, began to sing once more. Suddenly Nick remembered. "All right," he croaked in a salt-caked voice. "All right—I remember!"

And in a voice that would have made Melba O'Shaughnessy, late of his bed, shudder with horror, Nick Carter sang the rest of the poem:

"Before we go to Paradise by way of Kensal Green—"

"N3?"

"Barely," acknowledged Nick. "Just barely. Who you?"

"Working on code Doomsday and EOW?"

"Yes," said Nick wearily. "Yes! Now let's cut out the identity routine and get on with it. Time's wasting. I ask again—who are you? Just your name, please?"

"Gwen Leith. Special Branch. I saw you from the cliff. I didn't think you were going to make it. That poor little boat!"

Nick staggered to his feet and leaned against a column of rock. He wondered if he had been assigned a kook on this, of all missions! He peered around, upward. He seemed to be in the inside of a tar barrel. Also in some sort of rock trap.

"I agree with you," he said. And meant it. "She was a fine little boat. But there is now me to worry about. I seem to be in some sort of trap, a pit or something. How do I get out of this damned place?"

"You're in a rock chimney," the girl said. "It's the only one in the cove—and you had to land in it." She sounded reproachful.

"I'm sorry," Nick said. "I'll try to do better next time! But for right now can't we figure a way to get me out of here? Fast!"

"Are you hurt?"

Nick flexed his muscles and did a couple of fast knee bends. He put his hands against the rock and pushed hard in an isometric or two. He was feeling better by the second. Stronger and hungrier—and thirstier! The very thought started a glow in him. This was Scotland, after all!

"I'm fine," he told her. "So? What about a light?"

"Daren't risk it. Too many Druids around."

If Nick hadn't been briefed by Travers on the plane that one would have thrown him. As it was he ignored it. "So how do I get out?" He let the impatience show.

"Catch."

The end of a rope hit him in the face. He yanked hard, testing it. It

held. "You got this belayed up there?"

"Yes. It's all right, redly. Around a rock. You want me to help you?"

Nick grinned to himself as he went up the rope hand over hand, his legs dangling free. Help him? He found himself anxiously looking forward to seeing Gwen Leith, of Special Branch. Sounded like a character. Then he thought—she must be the best they've got or they wouldn't send her on this job. Probably intelligent and clever as hell—and looks like an old claymoor!

She didn't smell like a claymoor, old or new. She smelled like heather and wild thyme. And the hand that reached for his, with a strength that surprised him, was soft and small.

"Maybe I'm wrong," Nick mumbled, half to himself as he let her hand guide him over the lip of the rock. "I hope."

"Wrong about what, N3?" She was a slim evanescent figure beside him, still holding his hand. There was only the loom, the blur, of her—that and her scent.

"Nothing," he said. "Skip it." He released her hand and peered around. Below and to his left the sea was a writhing mass of wave and wind, a flickering and unceasing cauldron of boiling motion. Up here he was attacked by the wind again, but it seemed to be losing some of its weight. Even as this thought struck him he glanced up and saw an errant star or two, and could see, or thought he could, a nimbus where the moon was hiding.

"Am I wrong?" he asked, "or is this howler breaking up?"

"It's veering," she agreed. "In an hour or two it will be nearly calm. The weather's like that up here in northeast Scotland. But come on, N3, we mustn't stand here and natter all night! You'd better take my hand again. I know the path down to the moor."

They left the little rock table and she led him downward along a narrow, twisting path. She went swiftly, her hand in his, and Nick found himself increasingly anxious to know what she looked like. She appeared to be slim and rather tall, and very quick and nimble on her feet. Nick chuckled to himself. He knew what the trouble was—knew it of yore! Reaction was setting in—he was cold and hungry and wanting a drink, yes, but the real matter was that he had come back from death yet again! Cheated the bony old gent, as so many times before. And when he did that he always, but always, wanted to taste deeply of life!

For nearly half an hour she led him downward with the sureness of a mountain goat. At times she needed both hands to feel her way, and Nick hooked one of his big paws into her narrow belt and felt the soft firmness of her back, the ripple of velvet fleshed muscles.

As they descended she told him how worried she was about her

fellow agent, Jim Stockes, who had gone into Dunnet to make contact with one of the few plants they had in the Druids. He had never returned.

"I should have gone in his stead," said Gwen Leith. "He's a Scot, too, but from the Lowlands. And even though he is a Double O and one of the best in the business the job was not for him. I should have gone! I was born in Canisby and I've known these people, and this region, since I was a bairn. But Jim wouldn't have it! He insisted that I meet you and he would make the Dunnet contact. But maybe I'm worrying for naught—perhaps he'll be at the black house when we get there. If he isn't, N3, there will be only the two of us!"

The gale was passing now. There were a few stars in the wind shredded sky and a hint of morning in the east. The rain slackened to mist. They reached the bottom of the cliff and she led him across a blasted, desolate heath and into a narrow glen. By now Nick's eyes were accustomed to the light and the strange terrain and he was seeing better than she was. He no longer needed her guidance and walked beside her. They reached the bottom of the glen, where a burn ran full and foaming, and she went unerringly into the midst of a conifer spinney where a little car glinted in the growing light.

Nick Carter had been thinking a lot on the trip down, and saying very little. He was aware of the machinations of Ian Travers! The man had been nearly apologetic about the agents whom Nick was to meet—and now one of them turned out to be James Stockes! The man who was nearly as much of a legend in the counter-intelligence world as Nick Carter himself!

N3 chuckled to himself. Travers was as cagey as Hawk. And never a word out of him about Jim Stockes! Just a couple of agents, Travers had murmured. We must make do with the best we have, you know. And gone on with his planning and instructions. He would be in London long before Nick was to be picked up by the Orestes—and from London he would be in constant touch.

The light was growing by the second. Gwen slid into the car with a flash of tanned knee. Nick got in beside her. He could nearly make out her face now. She was wearing a very brief skirt, which showed her lovely legs. These he saw in the faint glow of the little two-seater's dash. Her face was still a blur, but he thought he could make out a stubborn chin and a saucy nose.

Just before she trod on the starter the girl looked full at him. Her voice was tart. "Look at my legs all you please, N3. I'm not ashamed of them. But there'll be no touching, now or ever. I'm an engaged girl and if the world does not blow up this time, or perhaps even if it does, I intend to marry the man! You will understand that right now, N3, and behave yourself accordingly! I've had the same trouble with Jim

Stockes and set him the same terms! We've a desperate, dirty and dangerous job to do, the three of us!

There will be no time for anything else, and even if there were it would not be either of you I'd pick! I adore Jim, and I think I'm going to like you—but I know who you are and what you are, however brave and strong and cunning and all the rest of it, but I've no mind to become emotionally involved with supermen! I've told Jim and I'm telling you, once and for all. Clear?"

It was one of the very few times in his life when Nick Carter was taken completely at a loss. He found himself staring at her, at the outlines of a face he knew was going to turn out to be very lovely.

Then he laughed, in genuine good humor and appreciation. "Quite clear," he told her. "But please stop calling me N3—at least when we're alone. Just plain Nick will do. As you say there are only the three of us, at the moment, and no need for security or formality. We'll work better and faster on those terms—so let's be getting on with it! Dawn is coming."

"Aye," said the girl with her odd mixture of Scots and English, of phrasing and dialect, "it is that! We'd best get back to the black house before it breaks. We're to spend the day there, the three of us, and make our plans. There's a huge meeting of the Druids tonight, on Barrogill Moor, and we're to be there. There's been a rumor, only a bare rumor, Control says, that Pendragon himself is going to speak to the Druids tonight!"

She expertly backed the little Morris out of the spinney and found a pair of cart tracks which skirted the chuckling brook. "It's not far from here, the black house," she told Nick. "God—I hope Jim is back by now!"

She drove rapidly, the Morris bouncing and leaping over the rough track. They left the glen and crossed a barren stretch of moor where gorse and heather had already been winter killed. The wind was falling away to nothing and only a few spatters of rain slapped at the windshield. The gale was passing.

Nick rode beside her in silence. Now and again he glanced at those lovely knees but his mind was far away. Pendragon tonight? So soon? He doubted it, somehow. This job was not going to be that easy. He had a feeling about this one—he was going to win it, all right, but it was going to be long and tough over a far trail! A long way to go before he killed Pendragon! But he'd had his bad moments and they were over!

He felt an almost irresistible desire to reach over and squeeze one of those knees, but he did resist. She wouldn't understand that it would be a gesture not of desire, or sex, but only of companionship and shared determination! All of which was most unusual for Nick

Carter, the loner. But this mission was like nothing before—this was the Big One!

But Gwen Leith wouldn't understand. Later, then. First work—then reward!

He contented himself, during the remainder of the brief ride, by checking over his weapons. He was traveling very light this mission. He had the Luger 9mm taped to his leg—he would certainly have lost it otherwise—and along the inside of his right forearm, nestling in its chamois sheath, was Hugo. The stiletto. Nick had come more and more to favor the stiletto of late. Deadly. Fast. Silent.

Now, flexing his muscles and trying to ease the cramp of his big frame in the tiny car, he flicked his right hand just a bit down. Felt the hilt of the stiletto slide from the sheath and down into his palm. Ready for throwing or stabbing. He had taken a special course in throwing during his last stay in Washington—AXE had borrowed some experts from the CIA—and he was anxious to test his skill in combat. He had never really been much of a thrower—too chancy and if you missed you were usually weaponless. Yet if one were expert enough—

Gwen Leith spoke for the first time in five minutes. “Just yonder,” she said. “The black house. And there's no car— Jim Stockes isn't back yet!”

Chapter 4

THE BLACK HOUSE

The black house stood in a depression in the moor near the sea edge and the cliffs. It was, as Gwen explained, an ancient crofter's cottage built of turf and stones and very little wood. It was called a black house because there was no chimney, only a hole in the turfed roof to let smoke escape, and the inside of the cottage was stained black with the soot and smoke of decades. It stood desolate and alone on the moor, amid the forlorn crying of gulls and curlews, reached only by two faint tracks along which the girl drove the little Morris.

Nick, with his eye for terrain, saw that it made an excellent snug hole against a cursory search from afar. Concealed as it was in the hollow of the moor, it was hard to see from a distance.

They parked the Morris and headed for the doorless hut. Nick remarked that it seemed in excellent repair. At least the roof was whole.

"People use it for the fishing at times," the girl explained. "So it's kept up a little. And the locals, the lads and lasses, they—" she broke off with a note of constraint in her voice. "Never mind that. Just watch your head now. You're terribly tall—and the door is not! Mind it!"

They paused at the door and Nick stood waiting for her to enter first. It seemed the darkest of caves in there, but outside the light had pearly now and he could see her quite plainly. No distinction of feature was yet possible, but in general outline she was tall, slim waisted and big breasted. She wore a cardigan and over that a dark leather windbreaker. Her head was bare and even in the bad light he knew her hair was flaming red. Cut short, near to mannish, and fitting her well shaped head like a scarlet cap. He could not yet discern the color of her eyes.

As she hesitated Nick made a little bow and, being facetious to put her at ease, said: "After you, my lassie. And quick, if you don't mind. I want to get a fire going and start drying out these clothes. I'm also famished and dying for a drink—I hope you and your friend thought to bring along some of the product of the country?"

Gwen Leith gave him a long cool appraising look. Her wide sweet mouth finally crinkled in a little smile. "We have that," she said. "Have a dozen bottles, I think. Jim likes it too." She ducked into the house ahead of him. Nick followed and waited in the gloom until an

oil lamp flared. Then, as the girl tossed more peat on a smouldering fire, N3 took in the interior of the black house. He did it in one swift glance and missed nothing, and though he appeared calm and relaxed—which he was—yet he had never been more alert! He was as sure of her as agent could be of fellow agent—she had known the code, both his own and Travers', and must be genuine—yet the price of life for an AXE man was the same as that for liberty—eternal vigilance! He was cold, weary, hungry and thirsty—he devoutly wanted this to be a safe house—yet he must be certain! So he stood, a tall unmoving shadow amid other lesser shadows, and watched her as she hustled around.

At long last he was satisfied. It was all right. Safe for now.

The girl handed him a bottle of whisky and a tin cup. "MacCamp's own," she said lightly. "My own father drank it and it always did the job for him. I ken it will for you as well."

It did. The whisky struck like a bolt of lightning at Nick's stomach. It built a fine little glow in him. He added another bit of fuel to the fire, then put away the bottle. The peat was glowing now and he took off his sodden pea jacket and the sweat shirt he had worn beneath it. He saw her eyes widen at the sight of his bared torso and grinned inwardly—he was, quite without smugness, used to the feminine reaction to his muscles. He put the thought away. The girl was right. There was a deadly job ahead and they had best get on with it.

She surprised him. "You won't be needing those clothes," she said. "We brought you others. Just in case." She nodded toward a little stack of suitcases which Nick had noticed in one corner of the hut. There was also, he noted, a selection of fishing equipment for surf, or beach fishing. Long rods and large, heavy reels.

Gwen Leith noted his faint look of surprise as she went to the suitcases. "Part of our cover. Jim and I are supposed to be fishing. And a rod makes a fine antenna." She glanced at her wrist as she found a suitcase and dragged it toward Nick. "Here. This is yours. And Control will be coming through now in half an hour. We've a receiver, but we can't transmit."

N3 nodded. "Pendragon's DF sets?"

She nodded. "We have to count on it. He's thought of everything else. But you'll want to change. I'll go and pretend to fish for a time. There's a beach at the foot of the cliff. Oh, and Control says you're to forget the Ward-Simmons cover. Circumstances have changed and it's useless now. Anyway there is no time for that sort of thing. Control also said that your orders might be changed at any time, so you're to hold yourself ready. From now until further notice everything is on a standby basis—hour to hour."

She kicked at the suitcase. "You'll find everything you need in there. You'll be quite the gentleman. Now I'll go fish. I'll be back in

twenty minutes.” She started for the door.

“Wait,” said Nick. He picked up the oil lamp where it flickered and smoked on a ledge. He held it to her face. “I still haven’t seen what you really look like.”

Gwen Leith stood very still. She regarded him calmly. “Then look your fill, Nick. But remember what I told you— don’t touch!” It was now, he noted, the voice of an educated Englishwoman. Only a trace of the native burr remained.

“I’ll remember,” he said. And looked at her.

Her eyes were slate blue-gray, set well apart in the fresh, outdoor skinned face. Tiny golden freckles sprinkled her nose and cheekbones. Her nose was tip-tilt and bordered on the snub, her mouth wide and generous. Her teeth were white and just irregular enough for true natural beauty. She was a tall girl—she came nearly to his shoulder—and her sleek cap of hair glinted gold-red in the dim light. Her legs were long and sturdy, yet slim, and her waist pinched in to nearly nothing. Nick could have spanned it easily. She was busty. That was the only word Nick could think of—big and busty, high and hard breasted. And she still smelled of heather and wild thyme.

In that fleeting moment he found himself thinking—no matter how absurdly ill-timed the thought—that it was a pity this was a Doomsday and EOW mission! Well—perhaps after he had killed Pendragon!

Gwen must have read his thoughts. She stepped quickly away from him and to the low door. She said, “No, Nick. I warned you! Now get changed. I’ll fish. After we listen to Control we can set about getting organized—for one thing I’m to fill you in on all the background about Pendragon and the Druids. What you don’t already know, of course. I expect you know as much as I do anyway. After all, you’re the Chief of this mission.”

“That I am,” Nick said. “And it’s damned little I know, either! There hasn’t been time for much briefing. So go do your fishing, lass, then come back and we’ll get with it. And I hope you’ve got something to eat around here?”

She pointed to a wooden box in a corner. “Loads of tins.”

N3 stood by the glowing peat and soaked in the warmth as he peeled down to the buff. He tossed the dead Ward-Simmons’ boots and trousers away with a grunt of satisfaction. He took off the little rubber belly and yanked away the goatee—Makeup had done a hell of a job on that! It had stuck to him all through the dunking he’d got. Nick scratched his chin where spirit gum was itching. He did a few knee bends and breathing exercises. There was no time for yoga now—perhaps later. He and Gwen must spend the entire day here in the black house, waiting for the return of Jim Stockes.

He opened the suitcase and got dressed. He was, it would appear,

an English gentleman on a walking tour through Scotland. And what a hell of a time to go on a walking tour, he thought dourly as he donned the well fitting tweeds and the heavy walking shoes. Pendragon was about to start World War III and here he was on a walking tour! Just like the English!

The outfit included a flannel shirt, wool tie, and a cap of heather mixture. There was a walking stick. There was a wallet stuffed with pound notes and a passport that told him he was Major Ralph Camberwell, British Army, Rtd. In the glassine compartments of the wallet were a number of cards. Nick was a little startled to find one indicating membership in an old and staid club on St. James Square, London. He actually did belong to that club!

Hugo, the stiletto, went well enough in his sheath beneath the tweed sleeve, but Wilhelmina, the stripped down 9mm Luger, was another matter. Nick had put in for a new holster from ARMS, but hadn't yet drawn it, and there had been no time to get a replacement. Finally he had to settle for thrusting the waspish gun into his waist band. If he kept the tweed jacket buttoned, it did well enough.

Whoever had packed the suitcase—Nick had no idea who handled these matters in British Intelligence—had included a carton of Players. Harsh, but better than nothing. N3 thought wistfully of his own long cigarettes in the penthouse back in New York—and for just a moment of Melba O'Shaughnessy, the lovely Melba whom he had left in such a tearing rush that there had been no time for proper goodbyes. Certainly not for explanations!

He sighed and prepared to light a cigarette. Carefully, because it was new to him, he checked the tiny knob on the cigarette lighter he had been given by old Poindexter, head of Special Effects and Editing. Poindexter had been most emphatic about the new lighter! Be sure the little knob is in the off position—or no face!

N3 was most careful and lit his cigarette safely. He glanced at the AXE watch on his wrist. It had come through unscathed, of course. You couldn't dent them with a sledge hammer!

Time for Gwen Leith to be getting back. He enjoyed his cigarette and took another drink and paced the narrow dirt floor of the black house. Still she did not come.

Nick, killing time, drew a ring on one of the sooty turf walls and walked across the room. As far as he could go. He turned, flicked his wrist, felt the stiletto slide down into his palm and threw it in one fluid motion. The needle-pointed little Toledo blade quivered in the circle, just an inch off center. Nick frowned. Have to do better than that. In his work, and in all things pertaining to it, he was a perfectionist!

He was still throwing when Gwen entered the hut. She hurried to

one of the suitcases, opened it, and began dialing the small receiving radio it contained. After a few seconds of static buzz and wail the voice of Ian Travers came into the black house. The same dry, perfect upper-crust British tones Nick had heard in Hawk's office. He had slipped the stiletto back in the sheath and gone to stand by the girl as the set warmed. She put her finger to her lips.

"Don't talk at all! At the end there will be code numbers—I have to work them out in my head, since we daren't carry a book."

Nick nodded. He regarded her with a new respect, and it was already healthy enough. Carrying a code, a complicated numbers code, in her head!

"Exterminator to Fish—this will be a single transmission—Regret must cancel zero-zero as is lost, strayed or stolen. Orders same. Targets of opportunity. Inform Colonial may have found back entrance to rat hole. Proceed pro code following. Out."

Travers' voice died away. There was a buzzing and clicking and the hollow drone of empty air. Gwen looked at Nick and put her finger to her lips. He nodded and lit another cigarette, still very careful of the little knob in the off position.

Another voice came on and began to read a string of code numbers. They were in groupings of five digits, or letters, or mixed. Gwen bent close to the receiver, listening with a fierce frown of concentration. The code groups were repeated once. There was a buzzing click and the transmission was over. Gwen closed the suitcase and looked up at Nick. Tears glinted in her eyes.

N3 started to chide her, to say that good spies didn't cry, then thought better of it. After all she was a woman! And perhaps Jim Stockes had meant more to her than she let on.

Rather gently, for him, he said: "Something's happened to Stockes? I got that much—cancel zero-zero. Double O."

Gwen nodded and wiped her eyes. "I'm such a fool! But of course Jim may not be dead. Pendragon's got him, though, and has warned that one more attempt to plant an agent on him will send up the balloon! We're to be most cautious, Nick, but to go ahead as ordered. That means we attend the big Druid rally tonight!"

Nick paced the narrow confines of the hut. "I'm the Colonial mentioned, I take it? And there's a back entrance into the rat hole? I've got new orders?"

The girl went to the box in the corner and took out tins of food and began to open them. She worked busily, not looking at him.

"Yes. That was all in the number code. We're to attend the rally tonight. It's bigger and more important than we thought at first. Pendragon is getting very bold. Anyway we're to go and if Pendragon is there, and we can identify him, we're to kill him!"

Nick shook his head. "No. It won't be as easy as that. He won't be there!"

Gwen handed him a can of hash and a tin spoon. She poured water from a thermos into a shallow pan and put it on the peat to boil for tea.

"Control doesn't really think he'll be there, either. But there appears a good chance that his wife will be!"

Nick stopped pacing. "His wife? That seems odd—I'm surprised that he would risk her! Risk giving us a hostage at this stage of the game!" He took a mouthful of the delectable cold hash. "HMMMM—the famous Lady Hardesty! I wonder just where she does fit into all this?"

Gwen Leith's tone was cold. She flung a handful of tea into the pannikin on the fire, just now coming to a boil. There was something a little vicious about the gesture and Nick had to smile. Women! Even with the world coming to an end they would scorn an erring sister!

"The word you want," said Gwen frigidly, "is infamous! Not famous! Anyway Control says she may be there. He doesn't know in what capacity, or why. As for holding her as a hostage—I doubt that Pendragon would give tuppence to get her back! He may even be throwing her at us—sort of a temporary sop, as it were. A feint, something to keep us occupied and, as you Yanks say, out of his hair. My best information is that he would be glad to get rid of her."

Nick stopped pacing and opened another can of hash. He was ravenous. He upended a suitcase and sat and studied Gwen with a speculative eye. He was beginning to realize that she was no ordinary agent, whatever Travers had said or implied! She was too *au courant*, too much in the know, for that! He wondered what her true rank was?

Almost to himself, Nick said, "Pendragon—Lord Hardesty—divorced this dame once. Or she divorced him. Then they got married again! I wonder why?"

"The whole world wondered why at the time," said Gwen. "He's a cripple, you know. Lives in a wheel chair. Everything that—that made him a man was shot away in the war! And he divorced her! His lawyers proved that she had been with at least a hundred other men—and quite a few women! It was a very nasty trial. You must have read about it?"

Nick stared at the soot black ceiling. "No. I don't read that stuff. But Travers told me all about it." He could remember the dry voice of Travers, in Hawk's office a few hours ago, saying that perhaps in Lady Hardesty they might find Pendragon's Achilles' heel! Nick wondered. It might be an angle, at that. It would bear thinking about. Later.

He changed the subject. "What about my new orders?"

Gwen told him. Nick repeated them until he had them by heart.

They were contingent, of course. If Nick could kill Pendragon tonight there would be no need to go to London.

He and the girl spent the rest of the day sleeping and pretending to fish. She filled him in on Pendragon and the Druids. As Nick had begun to suspect she knew as much, or nearly as much as Ian Travers himself.

She explained how in the past ten years and under the very nose of Government the Ancient Order of Druids, a harmless if eccentric social group, had been infiltrated and taken over by Pendragon. Very much the way unions are taken over by racketeers. It had been absurdly easy, especially in a county like England with its tradition of law and order and respect for privacy and personal liberty. The Militant Druids, as the new order called itself, had been carefully law-abiding. At first.

Pendragon, Lord Hardesty, was a master in the art of misdirection. Gradually the Militant Druids had emerged as a political group—on the far right of right! Neo-Fascist! There were meetings and speeches and campaigns and, sometimes, riots and trouble. Government might not like this, but could do nothing. It was all very legal! Lord Hardesty, through his great newspaper, the London Daily Proconsul, had backed the Militant Druids. As was his right. Lord Hardesty himself had traveled and spoken for the Druids. He had written editorials in support of them. All signed with the same flourishing name—Pendragon! The editorials did not beat about the bush. No bones were made of the objectives of the Militant Druids—war now with Russia! Preventive war, it was called. Now! Without delay! Drop the bomb on them before they drop it on us!

“He found a lot of support,” Gwen said dryly. “A lot of people agree with him. Even in Government. Even right in our War Office!”

Nick said he understood. It was the same in the States. You didn’t have to go outside the Pentagon to find men in high places, both civilian and military, who held the same ideas.

That was Pendragon’s right hand!

His left hand was also at work! Building Landscape Island. Kidnapping and brainwashing top atomic scientists from all over the world! Building and planning and waiting!

Gwen tossed her cigarette into the peat fire. “Now the waiting is over. He’s ready. He’s got his men in key positions. All legally elected or appointed—like Hitler he wants to come to power legally, or make it look that way!”

Nick was seated on the floor, cleaning the Luger for the third time. The pistol was squeaky clean already, but it passed the time. Now he looked at Gwen. “That means you’ve got a traitor in your Cabinet.”

She nodded. “Yes. And the same in France, West Germany and

Italy. Traitors in high places. Waiting to step in and take over and follow Pendragon's orders."

Nick whistled softly. "First order of the day—bomb Russia!"

He was aware of her level gaze on him. Finally, so softly he could barely hear her, she said, "There's only you now, Nick. For God's sake don't fail us."

Chapter 5

THE DEVIL'S TEMPLE

Barrogill Moor was ringed with flaming crosses. The fiery circle was perhaps a quarter of a mile in diameter. In the center crouched the mouldering and fire blackened ruins of Barrogill Castle, haunted by bloody memories.

Nick Carter and Gwen Leith lay amidst the crags topping one of the few tors in the vicinity and watched the scene below them. For hours now the white gowned and masked figures had been arriving, parking their cars at a distance, and walking to the castle ruins.

It was nearly nine o'clock. The gale had vanished, leaving a clean scrubbed sky glittering with stars. It was a cold and windless night.

Nick borrowed the girl's night glasses—these British agents came well equipped—and studied the near ruins of the ancient castle. The white clad figures appeared to be grouping near a rough platform formed by fallen stones. A sort of crude dais. Nick watched as a loudspeaker was rigged and attached to a mike. Almost immediately the strains of martial music crept over the dark moor. Some of the white legions began to sing and chant. Spotlights began to play on the stone dais and from somewhere they could hear the muted hum of a generator.

"Pretty smooth," Nick admitted. "They're well organized. I wonder when the festivities begin?" There would be a speaker, he supposed. Probably several speakers. And God only knew what else—one thing he was sure of—Pendragon himself wouldn't be here tonight. Not at a raucous open air conclave like this. He had bigger fish to fry! He wouldn't come out of hiding for a lot of phony claptrap. Flaming crosses and white robes and masks and martial music—all very well for the rank and file. Part of the show. A sop to the people. Lions and Christians! Gladiators. It all served to whip them up, get the rank and file in the mood to back Pendragon to the hilt when the moment came. Probably this scene was being repeated elsewhere in Britain tonight.

And Lady Hardesty? Nick could see no particular reason why she should show up at an affair like this. But he hoped she would. He hoped he would recognize her when she did—he was developing a keen interest in Lady Brett. Mrs. Pendragon!

He handed the glasses back to Gwen. "Hold the fort," he said. "I'm going out and scout up a couple of white uniforms for us. I shouldn't

be long. I spotted a couple about five minutes ago.” He patted her shoulder and felt her shrink from his touch. Odd, that. He didn’t, as a rule, affect women that way. Quite the opposite! But Gwen Leith had shown a marked aversion to being touched. At least by him. Coming over in the car tonight he had, quite by accident, brushed her bare knee with his hand and she had nearly leaped through the roof. Nick shrugged. Maybe he was losing his charm. No time to worry about it now, in any case. They needed a couple of gowns and masks so they could join the fun.

And speaking of couples—where had they gone? The two he had spotted wandering casually away from the main throng of ghosts. It had been Jim Stockes’ plan, originally, and Gwen had relayed it to Nick. There were always lovers at these affairs! Sneaking away for a spot of what Gwen had described, with a grimace, as a bit of grab and tickle! Possibly more.

Now, as Nick Carter went quietly around the edge of the moor toward some thick, growing bracken, he hoped for the more. He wanted them off their guard. Completely engrossed in each other. He wanted to catch them in the act, if possible. That way they would be easier to handle. He didn’t want to kill any of these poor slobs if he could help it. A lot of them were innocents, as Gwen put it, being used by Pendragon. They hadn’t the faintest idea of what was really going on. It would be the same as killing a man back home because he belonged to the Elks!

Nevertheless! Nick flicked the little stiletto into his palm, then slid it back into the chamois sheath. He eased the Luger in his waistband. The stakes were too high to take chances! There must be no sound, nothing that might warn the other Druids.

Nick needn’t have worried. The lovers in the patch of bracken wouldn’t have heard a charging elephant. He was as stealthy as a tiger in the night, his usual gait when on a stalk, but it was wasted. He paused at the edge of the bracken and listened for a moment.

“Geordie—oh, Geordie! Oh Geordie we shouldn’t—no —no—yes—yes—”

“I love ye, lass! Oh, lass, how I love you! Now, lass. Now! Just so, ye’ll ken! Now lass—”

“Ohhhh—Geordie!”

The harsh bright starlight fell on Nick Carter’s lean features. He smiled faintly and there was at once something saturnine and tender about his expression. Swiftly he reversed the Luger in his hand. Love and death! Passion— and compassion! At least he wouldn’t have to kill them! He went into the clump of bracken as silently as some night creature.

The lovers had taken off their gowns and masks and flung them to

one side. They were stretched on a noisy mattress of dead leaves and bracken, forgetful of the world, a sighing groaning tangle of white arms and legs.

"I'm sorry," said Nick softly. He clipped the man behind the ear with the butt of the Luger.

The man groaned and slumped on top of the woman. She opened her eyes and stared up into Nick's face, a foot from her own. Her red mouth yawned in a beginning scream. Nick put one sinewy hand around her soft throat and squeezed gently, not to kill, only to silence. The woman began to thrash wildly about, kicking her dark-stockinged legs high in the air. She clawed up at Nick's face. He increased the pressure of his steel fingers and sat on both of them.

The woman gave a final convulsion and was quiet. Nick let go her throat. In the brilliant starlight her face was swollen and congested, but she was breathing. He worked rapidly then. He bound them both, wrists and ankles, with some flex taken from the missing Jim Stockes' suitcase. He gagged the man with his own handkerchief. Finding nothing else, he ripped off one of the woman's stockings and pushed it into her mouth. There was no time to determine if either was a mouth breather—if so it was just too bad! He grabbed up the white gowns and hoods and rejoined Gwen. She was still watching the Druids through the night glasses. Matters seemed to be heating up a bit. The Druids were assembled in a deep-ranked semi-circle around the crude stone dais, listening quietly and with respect to a gowned and masked speaker. The speaker's voice carried well over the moor; he was speaking in some shrill, high pitched and oddly inflected jargon that Nick had never heard before.

He tossed the robe and hood down beside Gwen. "What the hell language is he speaking? Don't tell me these Druids have a language all their own?"

She kept the glasses trained on the speaker. "In a way they do! He's speaking Gaelic—the ancient tongue of the Celts. Old Irish, Scots, Welsh—they all have a common root in Gaelic. It's all part of the mummary, you see. For effect. Like burning the crosses to call the clans together. All part of the old folk myth thing that Pendragon is using. It's good showmanship."

"Maybe," Nick grunted as he slid down beside her, "but do they understand it?"

"Not much, probably. A few words now and then. That's not really important—it's the emotional effect that's important. Right now he's telling them about the guest speaker for tonight—it seems to be someone very important and special. And there's going to be some sort of special ceremony, too."

N3 regarded her profile, careful to keep his distance, to avoid a

laying on of hands. She was very lovely in the starlight over the cold, sweet earth smelling moor.

“Do you understand Gaelic?”

“Enough. I told you I was born around—shhhhhh.” She held up a warning hand. “This is a difficult part—he’s talking about some sort of ritual that’s coming up.” Her lithe body wriggled in excitement and Nick thought she looked starkly pale. Her breathing had increased in tempo. As to herself she muttered: “God! Oh, no—they can’t really be going to— No! It’s too utterly fantastic!”

“What is?” Nick caught some of her strange excitement. He seized her shoulder, forgetting her aversion to being touched. “What in hell is going on, Gwen?”

She rolled away from him and stood up. “I couldn’t catch all of it, but it seems there’s going to be sort of Druid ritual soon now. Some sort of Devil worshipping, I think. The Druids hated Christianity, you know, and tried to destroy it! From what I could catch that’s going to be the big show tonight—sort of a Black Mass!” Her voice broke. Nick stared at her. There was no doubt about her pallor. Gwen Leith was frightened. Badly frightened!

N3 cursed inwardly and decided to ignore it. It was not, after all, so surprising. She was a Celt right down to the fine bones of her. Nick began to have a keener appreciation of Pendragon’s subtlety.

Nick pointed to the robes and hoods. “Better get into costume,” he said brusquely. He took the glasses from her and trained them on the dais below. Give her time to compose herself. A scared agent wasn’t much good to him. Especially a woman—an intelligent and sensitive woman who let herself succumb to some weird mumbo-jumbo call of ancient blood and beliefs! And yet he could have sworn there was something else bothering Gwen Leith—not just stark fear!

In a moment she said, very quietly, “I’m all right now. Thank you for understanding.”

N3’s words were like razors. “I don’t understand! There’s no time now anyway—if you’re too scared, if you’ve got the shakes, I’ll do the job alone. Whatever it is!” He was shrugging into the white gown as he spoke. He put on the masking hood. He checked the Luger once again. They confronted each other, two ghostly shimmering creatures bathed in pale starglow.

“I said I’m all right.” Her voice was muffled behind the hood.

“Right. Let’s go. We’ll walk close together, slowly, hand in hand. We’re the lovers, you understand? We’re coming back, rejoining the group after our little romp. Slow and easy does it—play your role. We’re more interested in each other than we are in Druidism or whatever. Okay?”

“All right.” Yet she hesitated. Her hand reached out, then wavered,

draw back.

“Come on!” His voice was harsh. He grabbed her hand and pulled her down the steep glissade of the tor. Damn women anyway! Especially damn neurotic women secret agents at a time like this. What in hell went on? There had been no squeamishness about touching back at the cove, when she had helped him over the rocks!

They reached the level moor and strolled slowly toward the white mob clotting around the stone dais. Nick made a fast educated guess—must be around five hundred of them! Plenty to tear the girl and him apart if things went wrong!

They were approaching the outskirts of the crowd now. The speaker was working himself into a frenzy, shouting into the mike in shrill tones.

Nick whispered, “What’s he saying now?” Her answering whisper was husky, strained. Her small hand in his was hot and dry. He could feel the faint tremors running continually through her.

“He’s getting ready to announce the special speaker,” she told him. “He’s making a big thing out of it—something about the speaker, the guest tonight, being a special emissary straight from Pendragon himself!” Suddenly her hand tightened on his and her trembling stopped. Nick felt encouraged. Good. She was getting over the jeebies—the professional was taking over.

“Nick!” she said excitedly. “Nick—you don’t suppose it really could be—”

He shook his head. “No—he won’t come! But it might be the Lady Hardesty, at that! Just might be. Pendragon might have some special reason of his own for sending her here. I don’t know. But if she does show I want to take her! Don’t ask me how—I’ll think of something. Come on—we’ve got to work our way through this mob! Get up front so we can see and hear better. Don’t talk anymore and hold on to me! Tight! If we become separated we’ll never find each other in this mess!”

Gwen squeezed his hand in understanding. They pushed and elbowed their way into the crush of gowned men and women. No one paid any attention to them except to curse and shove back.

Their progress halted five ranks from the front. They could push no farther. N3 bent to whisper. “This will have to do. Now—if you think you spot Lady Hardesty squeeze my hand three times! Like so. She’ll probably be gowned and masked. Maybe she’ll try to disguise her voice. But maybe you, as a woman, can spot her before I can. Let me know the moment you’re sure—”

What were they all waiting for?

So gradually, so slyly, that at first he did not notice it, music began to inundate the moor, to slide into Nick’s hyper-sensitive brain. Weird

slow music with a keening note at first, then a faster tempo and a higher pitch with a chilling cold beat of muffled drums. Louder and faster. Louder and louder and faster and faster! Nick was surprised to find Gwen's hand sticky in his, then realized that he was also sweating.

The music tore into a fantastic rigadoun, whirling and whirling and now with an eldritch screeching quality. It halted abruptly. There was a great resounding brassy clash of cymbals! A single scarlet-tinted spotlight screwed a red tunnel into the gloom. It came to rest at the rear of the stone dais where a black archway slotted into a crumbling battlement. Someone—or something—was standing in the arch. Waiting. A great sigh went up from the crowd. As though the moor itself had taken a deep breath and expelled it.

Nick Carter felt the sweat prickle on his back. Gwen Leith was pressing close to him and he could hear the raggedness of her breathing beneath the hood.

The thing in the archway came forward into the light and bowed and said something in Gaelic. Someone in the crowd laughed. Nick felt an odd sense of relief. It was only someone—man or woman?—dressed in a Devil costume. A child's masquerade!

But he was wrong. It was more than just mere buffoonery. The crowd tensed again—Nick could feel it tightening and constricting about him like a web. There was no more laughter. Someone moaned.

The Devil was walking around the little dais now, a black cloak wrapped tightly around him. Some strange protuberance was pushing out the front of the cloak. Suddenly the Devil stopped his prancing and looked down at the front of his cloak and said something in Gaelic. A nervous titter rippled through the crowd.

Nick leaned toward Gwen and whispered. "What is it? What's he got under the cloak?"

She did not answer. Her attention was riveted on the tableau. Her palm was hot and greasy in his.

N3 took a deep breath and held it. It was a good way to calm down and reduce tension. And he was tense! He couldn't explain why—but he was. If only he understood Gaelic!

The Devil came to the very edge of the little dais and stood peering out into the crowd. Nick saw that the mask was full face—the usual papier-mache horror with hooked nose and tufted brows and satyresque ears. But the eyes behind the mask, peering at the silent crowd through the eye slits, were very human. Dark, glittering obsidian eyes. They seemed to be searching for something in the crowd. Someone? They rested on Nick and the girl for a moment, glinting black orbs, and Nick had the strange sensation that he stood revealed and naked. Absurd!

The Devil went back to the center of the stage and turned his back on the audience, saying something over his shoulder that caused the crowd to titter again.

Nick squeezed the girl's arm cruelly. His whisper was harsh. "What?"

She tried to pull her arm away. "Not now," she said. Her voice had a strangled quality. "Watch! This is only the beginning. There's much more to come!"

The Devil was still waiting with his back to the audience. He Was, it appeared, waiting for absolute silence. It came. In the hush Nick could hear the sound of night birds crying afar on the moor. Slowly the Devil raised his arms, opening the black cloak wide, spreading it like huge bat wings. The spotlight cast a bloody tincture over the solitary figure.

Whoever he is, Nick admitted, he's good! Very good. A fine bit of play acting. But what is he getting at? Nick let his free hand caress the cold butt of the Luger.

The Devil was turning now. Slowly. The music came up again. Insidious and sensuous and calling to the old gods and the flesh as plainly as though it spoke in words.

The Devil turned completely around. A great sigh and gasp of excitement went up from the throng as they beheld it.

The Devil was wearing a huge, rigid, springy black phallus! A priapus! A two-foot male symbol strapped to his front. The Devil came again to the stage-front and leered out at the crowd. He pushed the black phallus out and wiggled it and laughed knowingly. The crowd responded with a low, rising moan of approval. The Devil cocked his head and wriggled his pelvis. The strapped-on phallus moved suggestively. The crowd moved and moaned again. Nick could feel excitement growing in the jam-packed throng about him. The whole sweating, sticky, obscene and vile mass of them was being aroused sexually by the Devil on the stage. The music had gone low again now, but it was there and it was frankly erotic. Gwen was huddled close against him. She was shaking. If the spell was broken for Nick it obviously still held her in thrall. He could smell her sweet, strange odor through the thick gown. And he knew, suddenly knew, that he could do anything he pleased with her at the moment. Gwen Leith was caught up in the toils of raw pagan desire, everything forgotten but her own raw fleshy drives. Her sweaty fingers brushed suggestively across Nick's palm.

God damn it!

Nick flicked his wrist and the little stiletto came down into his palm. Deftly, swiftly, taking care not to be seen, he jammed a quarter inch of the blade into one of Gwen's hard little buttocks!

“Ohhhhh!”

Nick leaned close to her, seeming to caress her. No one would think anything of that! Not in this sexual madhouse! Her little outcry was quite in order.

Viciously, close to her ear, he said: “Will you for God’s sake snap out of it! We’re not here for fun and games, damn it! Tell me what goes on—is this all of it? Just the sexual frenzy bit?” He nodded to where the Devil was strutting around the stage, thrusting and gesticulating with the black phallus and chanting something in Gaelic. “Is this the works? If so we’d better cut out—there’s nothing here for us!” Before the girl could answer him the Devil came again to the forefront of the stage and held up his hands for quiet. The crowd buzz died abruptly. The Devil began to speak in lilting Gaelic with an angry overtone. Nick was studying the Devil’s legs with attention for the first time. In the badly fitting red tights it was hard to tell—but wasn’t there something feminine about those legs? Beneath the hood Nick’s smile was at the same time skeptical and interested—could it be? Was the Devil a woman? A woman playing a part, showing off, dancing around with that huge black male symbol attached to her? What sort of woman, what sort of queer twilight mind, would enjoy such a grotesque mime? Enjoy pretending she was the Devil? Pretending she was a man?

Nick frowned. It just might be, by God! It just might! From what he had read, heard, and been told lately the Lady Hardesty was a devil. She would only be playing herself! He remembered the cold dark eyes behind the mask, the opaque eyes searching the crowd. Looking for what? Some sort of satisfaction? But a nymphomaniac never got any satisfaction—that was the whole trouble! That was the why of their eternal search. Always seeking. Never finding.

But suppose, just suppose, that Lady Hardesty did find a sort of perverse fulfillment in this grotesquerie? It might even supply the thrill she had never been able to find in sex! It would explain her presence here, at any rate—if she was indeed the Devil now chanting and cavorting on the stage.

And there could be another reason! Nick’s cold computer mind did not overlook the fact that she might be here as— bait!

The Devil stopped talking and moved back into the shadows, out of the scarlet spotlight, Gwen Leith clutched at Nick’s hand, her voice taut with excitement. “There is going to be a sacrifice, Nick! In a moment now. They’re going to burn something to appease the old gods!” The coldness grew in N3. “Burn what?”

He could barely hear her answering whisper. “The goat without horns!”

Instinctively Nick’s hand moved to the cold butt of the Luger and

snuggled about it. "You mean a human sacrifice?"

She nodded. Her hand was gripping his now with the strength of combined fear and excitement. "Yes. Of course it will be a dummy of some sort or maybe—maybe even a corpse! Something that will look like the real thing. Don't you see, Nick—that's why the Devil has been whipping up the crowd, getting them excited! So they'll accept the idea of a human sacrifice! The goat without horns. Once they do accept it they'll belong to Pendragon body and soul!"

It was a very clever and succinct analysis. Gwen had indeed come back. Her mind was ruling her body again. Also she had been whispering too loudly and some of the Druids near them were beginning to stare. Someone told them to shut up!

Robed figures moved swiftly on the stage now, setting up a large wooden cross in a slit in the stone floor. They were fast and efficient. The crowd watched in silence as the cross was wrapped in gasoline soaked sheets. The bulky sheets were twisted around the upright and the cross-bar and tied in place with wire. The acrid odor of gasoline drifted out over the crowd. The men finished their work and vanished into the shadows. The Devil came to the stage front again. The black phallus was gone now. The Devil pointed to the waiting cross, chanted something in Gaelic, and made a sign to someone waiting in the dark archway at the rear of the stage.

Four robed Druids came out of the gloom. They were carrying a human body. A man. Naked except for a loin cloth. A dead man. His face was in shadow. A great sigh, a massive sob, ran through the crowd. Behind Nick someone muttered that this was going too far. He was shushed savagely. The crowd was enjoying itself.

The four men raised the figure to the cross and began to strap it on. Nick guessed that asbestos straps were being used. He peered closer, straining his eyes, trying to determine if the body was real—a corpse—or merely a clever dummy.

Obviously it was a mistake. It must have been planned otherwise. But one of the Druids working the lights made a mistake and put a white beam squarely on the face of the man on the cross.

Gwen gave a little moan and collapsed against Nick, her knees sagging. He held her up with one muscular arm. "Easy," he whispered. "Don't crack now. It's Jim Stockes, isn't it? I thought it might be."

He felt her nod. "Yes—Oh, God, yes! Th—they killed him. And now they're going to burn him! Nick—isn't there something we, you, can do?"

"We've just got to stand here and take it, honey! Just be thankful that he's dead. He's beyond hurting now."

Gwen seemed to recover some of her composure. She no longer clung to him for support, but she huddled close and did not look at

the stage. Nick's own emotions were mixed. A cold and savage rage was rampant in him. But that must be controlled for now, unless he wanted to join the dead Jim Stockes on the cross. While in another part of his brain a small voice whispered that thus it came to all secret agents in the end, in the final reckoning. Jim Stockes had been a legend in the profession. Witness his end! Somewhere in the future, Nick Carter knew, Fate was laying a similar trap for him. How it came did not matter—bullet, rope, poison, knife—fire ...

FIRE!

The Devil touched the lighted taper to the base of the cross. The flames leaped up in white fury. And the man on the cross opened his eyes and began to scream as the fire ate his flesh!

Gwen Leith screamed too. A high tortured sound wrenched from her as she saw and understood. For a heartbeat her scream hung alone in the air, and heads swiveled toward her, then her keening was gobbled up by the hysterical roar of the Druids.

Gwen went to pieces. She threw back her hood and grabbed Nick's gown and tore at it, shaking him. Her red mouth was twisted in anguish. "They're burning him alive! Oh—God—they're burning him alive!"

N3's brain was racing with the speed of light. He acted if and thought at the same blazing pace. The fools had miscalculated, of course. They had drugged Stockes, not killed him, and the drug had worn off too soon!

There was confusion on the stage. Even so Nick was aware that the Devil had come to the front and was peering into the crowd. Looking for what?

The burning man screamed on. His lower limbs and his arms were blackening now, charring as the flames became greedier. A sickening odor of roasting flesh stung Carter's nostrils.

He slapped Gwen Leith hard across the face. "Get ready to run," he snapped. "I'm going to save him!"

It was saving him! It was all he could do for a fellow agent, another mortal in fearful pain. Nick Carter whipped the Luger out of his belt and aimed it across his forearm at the burning man on the cross. He must not miss!

The Luger coughed once. The man on the cross slumped, his arching body dying on the instant. There was a small round hole in his forehead, visible where fire had not yet seared the flesh.

Nick grabbed Gwen and spun her around. "Run!" he yelled. "Run!"

At the sight of the Luger the crowd fell away. A narrow path opened in the white horde. But not for long. Someone leaped at Nick, tried to grapple with him. Nick shot him in the stomach and whirled away. Ahead of him Gwen was running unmolested. Nick flicked the

stiletto into his hand and began to lay about with it. Gowns ripped. Blood spurted. He literally carved a path to the thin outer edges of the throng. Everything and everybody was in a state of mad, shouting confusion or he would have been caught and borne under. But none of the Druids knew exactly what was going on. That saved them for the time being.

One big Druid, more alert than the others, tackled Nick just as he broke free of the crowd. He wrapped powerful arms around Nick's legs. Nick daggered him in the back three times. The man groaned and fell away. Nick sprinted across the moor, following the fleeing Gwen. From the corner of his eye he saw two white figures detach themselves from the mob and angle across the moor. They were after Gwen, trying to cut her off. Nick ran harder, cutting them off in turn. The Luger was ready in his hand.

Gwen had been heading for the tor where they had hidden earlier. A poor choice, Nick thought grimly. No defence there, no safety. Gwen was still in shock. His idea was to make for the car park—steal a car. Surely there would be one with the keys left in it.

Gwen's little Morris was a mile away. They'd never make that!

The two pursuing Druids caught Gwen just as she reached the foot of the tor. One of them tripped her. She fell heavily, rolling into a rough outcropping of rock where the tor began. Nick could hear her cry of pain even over the uproar behind him.

The two Druids were hovering over her like white vultures as Nick came pounding up. In his gown and hood he looked like any other Druid. They could not be sure and they waited too long. Nick shot them both in the head at close range. He pulled the sobbing girl from beneath the tangle of bloody robes. "Come on," he rasped. "We've still got a chance! If we can get off the moor we've got a chance! Run!"

"I can't!" Her face was a pale mask of anguish in the star sheen. "My leg! Those rocks—I .think it's broken! I— I can't move it! Y—you go on!"

Nick Carter's brain and heart were as cold as ice. At times like these he functioned best. Perfectly. He shot one glance behind him. The Druids were surging across the moor in pursuit—a horde of white hobgoblins. The girl was right. The mission came first. Before everything. In a minute or less the crowd would be on him.

Gwen Leith, on the ground beside the dead Druids, was screaming at him now. "Go, damn you! I've got a chance— I know these people! If they get me it will delay them a bit. Run, Nick! For God's sake run while you can! Remember—London!"

She began to cry and scream at the same time. "Run— run—you're all we've got now!"

Nick turned. The lead Druid's were less than a hundred yards off.

Nick fired four times into the onrushing crowd, saw men stumble and fall. The crowd slowed for a moment, frightened.

“Luck,” said Nick Carter. He patted her shining cap of red hair and ran on past her into the long shadow of the tor. As he ran he cast off the white gown and hood. He turned and yelled back at the prostrate girl, knowing she could not hear him.

“I’ll be seeing you,” yelled Nick. “Trust me.”

Chapter 6

THE LONDON MAIL

Nick Carter was lost in the sleep of the utterly exhausted. He had, in turn, stolen a car and a motorcycle and, finally, some lad's bike. He had made it south through the Highlands to Inverness where he boarded an ancient steam train that chuffed him clear across the island to Oban, where he could get the London Mail. It had taken him all night and all day to get this far. He had not been in touch with Ian Travers. There was no way. He had no radio and Travers, on the plane coming over, had warned him against ever using a phone into Scotland Yard. It was the pass they had come to, said Travers bitterly. Even the Yard phones might be tapped; who knew how many police were in Pendragon's pay!

N3's orders were clear, as relayed from code by Gwen Leith. Travers had intimated that he might have found a back entrance to the rat hole—another way into Blackscape Island and Pendragon's missile complex. Contained in the code numbers had been Nick's instructions to proceed to London at once—if the Druid rally failed to produce any results. Well, it had produced results, all right. All of them bad! Jim Stockes was dead, Gwen was either dead by now, or a prisoner, and N3 was running for his life and trying to make London to carry out his orders.

So far as he knew London had not yet been bombed out, in spite of Pendragon's threat to strike if another agent was planted on him. That had been bluff! Pendragon was too sure of winning to play his trump except as a last resort.

Pendragon had much to be pleased about! His lieutenants, his organization, had Gwen Leith for one thing. They would make her talk. In time they would make her talk!

Not that it would matter much. Time was something that Nick and Travers, et al, didn't have a whole lot of! He had tried not to think of Gwen on the trip over to Oban. He only hoped she would hold out long enough to give him a bit of a head start—which she seemed to have done—and that they wouldn't hurt her too badly before they killed her.

His cover, such as it was, was the same as adopted at the black house. He was still Major Ralph Campbell, Rtd., who enjoyed wearing tweeds and walking in the Highlands. After boarding the Mail in Oban he had washed up and shaved, leaving a faint brisde of moustache for

what it was worth. There was no time, nor need at the moment, for elaborate disguises. He must face the world, and Pendragon, with his own clean cut and not unhandsome features. Hawk, upon occasion, had remarked that Nick had his share of vanity!

Nick's borrowed clothing had not suffered much on Barrogill Moor—the gown and hood having absorbed most of the punishment—so now he was fairly presentable. He had a wallet full of money and a definite destination. He had had a meal and a couple of drinks in Oban. He had a first class compartment in the last car on the Mail—in fact he had the entire car to himself! The porter and car attendant, a sour faced Scot with a large wen on his chin, had informed Nick that “this is na a good time for the journeying.”

So now he slept. Slept as a soldier sleeps during a lull in battle. Recuperating and saving his strength for a new fight. The London Mail, not far south of Oban and still in wild country, ran hooting through snow and rain, tunnels and viaducts and fields and sleepy little villages where the lights still glowed in the early November evening. The mountains sent back the mournful cry of the big Diesel as it ran through the cuts and around narrow bends. It had a five hundred mile run ahead of it, to Euston Station in London. First stop Glasgow.

The sulky porter had not bothered to make up the berth.

Nick did not ring for him. To hell with it. His clothes could hardly be more rumpled than they were. And he was bushed. Utterly beat. He stretched out on the long sofa-like cushion spanning the Continental style compartment and fell through a trapdoor to blessed oblivion.

Some time later—hours or minutes?—he was dimly aware that the train had stopped. He turned over on the | seat, deep in the fog of sleep, thinking that they must be H making excellent time to have reached Glasgow so soon.

Not that it mattered to him—he was staying on the Mail . straight through to London and he had a private compartment. He wouldn't be bothered. He returned to his dream of Melba O'Shaughnessy. A weird and somehow terrifying dream. Melba was singing at the Met and Nick was there, in the very front row. Melba came to the footlights and sang to Nick, her eyes melting with love for him. The thing was—Melba didn't have any clothes on! And whoever was manipulating the lights had put a bright baby spot on each magnificent swelling breast! Melba trilled a high note and her breasts bounced and jounced and spun and dimpled. Nick stood up and yelled at her, trying to tell her that she was naked. Melba laughed and went on singing. She pointed at Nick and said something and Nick looked down at himself. He didn't have any clothes on either! And now everybody in the Opera House was standing up and pointing at Nick and screaming shame—

shame—shame!

It was at about this point that N3 began to wake up and sense that something was wrong. The dream faded into fuzziness, like a movie dissolve, and somewhere he was conscious of a door opening. A draft of cold steamy air seeped into the compartment. The door closed. Still well below the threshold of consciousness, still Nick sensed that someone had entered the compartment. Was there now. He heard a tiny mouse-like squeak of springs. Someone had seated himself in the single chair facing the long seat on which Nick now feigned sleep. Actually, by this time, he was very much awake. Alert. He kept his eyes closed and his breathing regular. He was facing the right direction. All he had to do was open his eyes to see who the intruder was. He kept them closed and thought it over. It was hardly likely to be the porter or the train guard!

It wouldn't be simply another passenger because this was a private compartment—in any case the car was empty! There were plenty of other—

Nick caught the delicate waft of perfume. There was something familiar about it. In a moment it came to him— *Plaiser de Paris*. The girl in Singapore had used it. So did a lot of women, of course. The one who was sitting across from him now, for instance.

The next sound he heard was familiar, too. A sound that had always somehow excited him. One of the minor fetishes that every man has. The sleek and sensuous sound of nylon on nylon—of female legs being crossed!

Slowly, cautiously, Nick Carter opened one eye. Just the narrowest crack. The legs were there, all right, and they were certainly female. Long and slim legs in shiny black stockings. They were crossed high and the owner was wearing a short skirt. The black legs seemed to go on and on and on, with pale flesh glowing like white fire beneath the somber nylon.

He saw the hands. Long, frail and beautiful hands with blood red nails. They were nervous and impatient hands. They tapped a cigarette and carried it up out of his line of vision. Smoke drifted toward Nick. Turkish.

The black legs uncrossed themselves impatiently. Nick studied the position of the splendid knees and knew the owner was leaning forward to stare at him. He kept one eye slitted and his breathing regular. And knew that he was in trouble! Knew he had somehow been outsmarted! Knew who owned the legs!

The woman spoke: "I believe, Mr. Carter, that we can stop the play-acting now. I know quite well that you're awake." The voice was husky and mellow, sharply inflected, the voice of a person who had been trained to speak well.

Nick opened his eyes and looked across the compartment at her. He made no other move. Hugo, the little stiletto, was on call in the arm sheath and the Luger was snug in his belt. Maybe he would have to use them. Maybe not. Wait and see. Play it cagey at first.

Nick Carter's smile could be charming, dazzling, when he wanted to turn it on. He turned it on now.

"Lady Hardesty, I presume?"

The woman in the chair nodded. A hint of a smile twitched at the corner of her moist red mouth. But her eyes, long coal black eyes with an opaque quality, her eyes were not smiling. They regarded Nick with a somberly unconcealed interest.

She nodded. "Very clever of you, Mr. Carter. But what makes you so sure?"

"Who else would take such an interest in me!" Nick sat up. He yawned and ran his fingers through his hair. Every movement was slow, careful, without haste. Lady Hardesty had a large leather handbag on her lap and he didn't need two guesses to know what she had in it. Nick let one eye slide toward the frosted glass door of the compartment. The dim shadow of a man fell athwart the glass. A big man. Standing guard in the corridor.

Lady Hardesty crossed her slim legs and leaned toward Nick. She frowned. "You don't deny that you're Nicholas Carter? That you're a special agent for an American organization called AXE? A murder organization?"

Nick had already decided to drop the cover. It was useless. No point in beating a dead horse. Yet he wasn't going to give her too much satisfaction!

"I deny nothing," he said cheerily. "I admit nothing. A flosson I learned at the knee of my dear old silver-haired Daddy. May he rest in peace! The last words he ever spoke to me were: 'Son, never admit nothing.' "

Lady Hardesty frowned at him. Her pink tongue came out and moistened the scarlet mouth. Nick was noting a disparity in that mouth—the upper lip was short and prim, , almost child-like; the lower lip was full and sensuous and inclined to droop just a trifle. Altogether an exciting mouth, he admitted, wet and glistening as it was in a narrow triangular face. Her skin was perfection. Creamy pallor, finely textured, devoid of makeup.

Her hair was jet black, as dark as her eyes, and pulled into a severe chignon at the back of her long, swan-like neck. Lady Hardesty looked a bit like a beautiful school teacher, Nick thought. There was almost a prim quality about her! Her looks certainly belied her reputation! He remembered Ian Travers description of her: "a nympho to end all nymphos!"

She said: "You do it very well, Mr. Carter. The devil-may-care bit, I mean. I begin to find you quite interesting. It seems a pity to kill you."

"I couldn't agree with you more," said Nick. He started to put a hand in his pocket. "Can I get a cigarette without being shot?"

She nodded. "Go ahead. I shouldn't advise you to try anything. You might be able to kill me, of course, but it wouldn't do you any good. I've four gillies outside."

"Gillies?"

A hint of a smile. "Scots for peasants. Retainers. In this case gunmen."

Nick lit a cigarette, feeling with a finger to be sure the little knob on the fighter was in the off position. He had a feeling that he was going to need this deadly little gadget before the train reached London.

He put the lighter back in his pocket and blew smoke. "I see. You mean thugs?"

"If you like. No matter. They're big rough men and they have their orders. From my husband himself! Just now I've got them pretty well under control. They'll obey my orders—up to a point! Beyond that point, well, Mr. Carter, what I'm trying to tell you is that I'm nearly as much a prisoner at the moment as you are! It won't do you the slightest good to try to hold me as a hostage or anything like that! If they have to kill me to kill you—they'll do it. Do I make myself clear?"

"Lucid," assented Nick. "Absolutely lucid. Trouble in Paradise, eh? In other words Pendragon doesn't quite trust. Mrs. Pendragon! You're out on a leash, so to speak?"

Lady Hardesty took a gold cigarette case from the leather purse. She extracted a long cigarette and placed it between her moist glistening lips. She leaned toward Nick, her obsidian eyes never leaving his face. "You grasp matters quickly," she murmured. "You are as clever as they said you were. And as handsome, I might add."

Nick lit her cigarette. The faint effluvia of her slim pale body was wafted to him along with her perfume. He frankly admitted the desire stirring in him for this woman. Even now, in this moment of deadly peril, when he was probably within minutes of being shot to death and flung off a moving train, even now he could recognize and admit the power of her attraction. How did she do it? It was more than the model's body, the prim pallor of her, the long glittering eyes that were vaguely Oriental. What? Then he knew! She exuded a subtle quality of wantonness! That was it! That was it, of course! Lady Hardesty was a wanton and men—himself—could sense it the way a dog senses a bitch in heat!

A cold part of his brain told him that this was something that

might prove useful.

So he continued to play the fool while his mind ranged far and wide, looking for angles. He said: "Thank you kindly, m'lady. All compliments appreciated by those who are about to die. But I'm curious—who, precisely, are they?"

Lady Hardesty leaned back in the chair. She tapped ash on the floor and recrossed her long legs. There was a speculative look in her eyes as she studied Nick. Suddenly she appeared to make up her mind about something. "I think that perhaps we had better have a little talk before you are killed," she said. She blew smoke and her scarlet mouth twisted in a little grimace. "I feel, even on such short acquaintance, that it would be a terrible waste to kill a specimen like you! At least without giving you a chance! Of course you may not prove out! That would be too bad for both of us."

Nick grinned. "I'm sure it would. Especially me! Of course I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about, but if it keeps me alive I'm all for it. Maybe you could clue me a bit?"

She lowered her voice. "Sit perfectly still. Don't speak. Try to look sullen, downcast. Defeated. I'm going to talk to the gillie on the door. He'll be wondering what's going on—and remember that he's my husband's man, not mine! Don't start anything or we may both be killed!"

She rapped on the door. It opened immediately and Nick saw a big, roughly dressed man in a cloth cap. He stared hard at Nick with a pair of washed out pale blue eyes. A shoulder holster made a bulge under his ill-fitting jacket.

Nick did not return the fellow's stare. He glared at the floor of the compartment, playing the part of a trapped and defeated man. The door closed and he could hear them whispering in the corridor.

N3 thought fast. Here was a situation which it might be possible to exploit. Lady Hardesty was on the loose, but being watched, guarded. She had admitted as much. She and her husband, Pendragon, were obviously not in entire rapport. She was probably quite a thorn in his backside! With her reputation and all—which seemed justified, because Nick had no illusions as to why she wanted to keep him alive for a time—with her reputation she would create a bad image for Pendragon. The man might be a potential mass murderer, but he would want to woo the common folk with a virtuous, family man image. You could hardly do that if you were married to a common whore!

No—Nick added in fairness. Give her her due. A most uncommon whore! Yet Pendragon had not yet had her killed! He had even married her again! Why? And suddenly he knew the answer to that one—she knew too much! Pendragon had been wrong to divorce her

and she had soon let him know it. She must have blackmailed him, threatened to expose his plans prematurely, unless he married her again! As his wife she wanted her cut of the world, too! And Pendragon had had to go along, because he couldn't afford to have her killed yet! It would have been a messy, smeary case and Pendragon was trying to pose as the savior of the western world! So he'd married her again to keep her quiet. He permitted her a certain amount of freedom—on a leash.

Nick smiled grimly. If he failed, if they all failed, and Pendragon made it to power—goodbye, Lady Hardesty! She wouldn't live a day!

She must know that! She may be wanton, but she wasn't stupid. She must be building some fences of her own, making some plans against the day when Pendragon took over. Pendragon who lived his life in a wheelchair and couldn't—"everything that made him a man was shot away in the war." Gwen's description of Pendragon!

Nick Carter's smile was even more grim. The picture was coming clear now. Imagine a nympho like Lady Hardesty married to a sexual cripple like Pendragon! Married to a proud, imperious megalomaniac who would insist on fidelity, who would resent every peccadillo of hers as a stain on his honor!

N3 whistled softly to himself. He felt a reluctant admiration for the lady. Talk about playing with fire! Lady Macbeth had nothing on this kid!

Lady Macbeth! Another cog slipped into place. Nick snapped his fingers in subdued excitement. That was it. Lady Macbeth with a twist! Lady Hardesty didn't want her husband to rule. She wanted him to win power, all right, to bring off this nutty coup of his, then she wanted someone else to take over! Someone who could share with her, who could satisfy her sexual needs! It was as simple, and as complex, as that! If it had been written in flaming red letters it couldn't have been any clearer. Pendragon had plans for Lady Hardesty—her death! Lady Hardesty had plans for Pendragon—his death!

Lady Hardesty was looking for a new husband!

It might be, Nick thought, the chink in the armor! The Achilles heel that Travers had wished for. It just might be.

Nick Carter had the feeling that the next battleground was going to be right there in the sleeping car on the London Mail. Lady Hardesty had not killed him yet, had not let her gillies kill him. She was stalling. He knew why. She was thinking that Nick Carter might be the one.

There was the sound of altercation just outside the door. The gillie was shouting something about the Laird not liking this and the Laird not liking that. Lady Hardesty's reply was like a cracking whip. A

sullen response. Shadows danced on the frosted glass. The knob began to turn.

Nick Carter took a deep breath. It was an opportunity not to be wasted. An opportunity that none of them had foreseen. He smiled a little wryly. Sometimes a man could serve his country, and humanity, in the most unlikely way.

The door opened. N3, quite literally, girded his loins.

Chapter 7

SEX DUEL

Lady Hardesty entered the compartment. She was breathing hard and her pallor was even more pronounced. Rage, excitement, fear? Nick could not guess. She stood leaning against the door a moment, regarding him with her long dark eyes. He saw her reach back of her to click on the latch. They were locked in. The diesel gave a moaning grunt as the Mail swirled through a deep cut.

Nick lit a cigarette. Lady Hardesty seated herself on the couch, not far from him, and produced the gold case from her purse. She had been careful to take the bag into the corridor with her.

Nick held his lighter for her, thinking how easy it would be to press the little knob and blast away that, lovely vicious face. She cupped her hands around the flame and stared up into Nick's eyes. Again he read the interest and speculation in those eyes, plus something new. Desire! Desire and excitement!

Nick put the lighter away. "So how did it go with your little playmates? Trouble? I thought I heard voices raised."

She nodded. "My authority over them is very tenuous. They want to kill you now and throw you off the train. I talked them out of that, at least temporarily. I—I told them I want to take you to Pendragon alive! I said Pendragon, my husband, wanted it that way. I lied. He doesn't. He wants you dead as soon as possible." She reached a hand and put it on Nick's arm. She squeezed his bicep ever so slightly, feeling the smooth bursting muscle. Her mouth twitched and the dark eyes narrowed. "You see," she said very softly, "I'm already taking chances for you! Pendragon will never forgive me if anything goes wrong. They've told him you're deadly, a menace to his plans. His real orders, to them and to me, were to kill you on sight!"

Carelessly, casually, Nick put a big hand on one of the black nylon knees. It was an asexual gesture, as he meant it to be at first. It was a friendly touch, or so he hoped she would believe. But he felt her answering tremor. She quivered all over. So he knew something else about her—she was one great big erogenous zone! No matter where you touched her she would probably fire up! And she was a nympho! Meaning she could never attain real satisfaction! Nick felt pity for her and steeled himself against it. Never forget what she really was—never forget the dark eyes behind the devil's mask! He was sure of that now.

Lady Hardesty had closed her eyes at Nick's touch. She kept them closed for a moment as he went on, "You keep talking about they. Who are they?" If he could pump her a little before the battle of the sofa, so much the better. Any little tidbit of information might prove helpful—if he lived to use it.

To his mild surprise she answered readily. "Pendragon has people all over the world. In Washington, of course. He's had you and your organization watched especially closely. He knew the Prime Minister would ask you for help when he received our ultimatum. He was right, of course. And when we got the word that you had dropped out of sight, well, it was a natural supposition that you would show up in England. Or Scotland. That was the main reason my husband let me go to the rally on Barrogill Moor— as bait. He was hoping to draw you."

Nick nodded curtly. "He did."

The dark eyes were watching him closely now. Little flames were beginning to flicker in the nigrescent depths. Nick allowed his hand to stray a bit farther up the black nylon leg. His fingertips caressed the velvet of inner thigh. Lady Hardesty sighed and slid down a little on the seat, her long legs slack and opening to his touch. Nick felt a growing sense of triumph. She was like a drug addict needing a fix! He had her under control now, or very nearly. If he played his cards right. One effect of her growing desire, he noted with satisfaction, was that she talked readily. Talked with her eyes again closed, long dark lashes quivering and making little spider shadows on the pallid high cheekbones,

"Yes," she sighed. "You did attend the rally. But not in the way we had expected. You didn't take the bait—you didn't come after me." Her scent, white body and perfume, was heavy in his nostrils. Nick felt his own desire grow and twitch in anticipation. He stilled it with an effort of will. There was plenty of time. A long road ahead. He remembered the song, the mermaid's song, Gwen Leith singing so sweetly in the little cove.

For there is good, news yet to hear and fine things to be seen!

He moved his hand a bit higher. "What did you do with the girl?" he asked softly. This was the first real test! Would she flare and pull away from him in suspicion?

She didn't. She sighed and moved closer to him. "She's still alive," she said huskily. "She'll be all right if she doesn't cause trouble. They made her talk, of course. That's how we knew you were making for London."

Nick patted her thigh. "I was wondering how you found me."

"Quite easily. The weather's too bad for flying. There are no regular flights out of the Highlands anyway. This seemed the only

logical train. And of course our man in Oban saw you board it. So we had it flagged down at a little station. The train guard is one of us and the porter has been bribed. All very simple. If your compartment is empty when the train arrives at Euston nothing will ever be said. Ohhhhhhhhhh—don't ever stop doing that!"

Her last frenzied little moan was evoked by Nick's hand reaching a vital target. Constant tremors were racking her slim body now. She lay back against the seat, her swan throat arched, her eyes slitted and staring up at the ceiling. Nick Carter had the odd illusion that she was a victim on the rack, and he the tormenter. He took his hand away. With a little gasp she seized it and drew it back. Nick grinned to himself. Lady Hardesty was in the toils, in sexual travail, and in his power. Later it might be different. But for now—

"What did they do to the girl?" He kept his voice low, casual. He might have been inquiring about the weather.

Her answer was in the same vein. She might have been predicting the weather. "The snake torture. Very effective. I watched. I expected to be sick, but I wasn't. They staked her out naked and let a snake crawl over her. It was harmless, of course. They told her that. But she couldn't stand it—especially when it got between her legs!"

A crack AXE agent is many things. One of the things Nick was, at that moment, was a rock of composure. He did not let a muscle twitch. His lean saturnine face showed no emotion. "Pretty nasty," he said calmly. While his hands itched for her throat.

"Pretty nasty," he repeated. "Burning Jim Stockes—that was nasty, too! Your people play rough."

But she shook her head. A trifling motion. Her half-closed eyes were still fixed on the ceiling. She was slowly moving now, wriggling, swinging her hips in a little circular motion to meet Nick's stimulating hand.

"That was bad," she said. "A mistake. Crude. My husband is going to be furious about it. One of the Centurions had the idea—to drug him to make him look dead, and so he wouldn't feel anything—and then to burn him as a sacrifice. The idea was to get the whole crowd involved—they would be guilty too, you see. Guilty of letting it happen. But they botched it. He woke up and screamed." She shook her head slowly from side to side. "Pendragon is going to be in a perfect rage about it. It gives a bad impression. We're not barbarians!"

No? Nick had his own grim inner thoughts about that. Maybe they weren't barbarians—but they would do until some came along!

Lady Hardesty came over against him. Her eyes opened close to his and she stared at him. Her scarlet mouth whispered, "Kiss me now! No more talking for a time. Just kiss me now!"

Her lips were sweet and hot. They ravaged his. Her tongue struck

like a rapier at him, laving and caressing and thrusting. She bit his lip cruelly and he could taste blood. Hawk, he thought just before he was caught up in her frenzy, Hawk is never going to believe this! Even if I live to tell him!

Lady Hardesty's breathing was harsh now. Great gusty breaths. She stood up and pulled the black dress over her head in one fluid motion. He saw then why the black nylon legs seemed to go on forever, why there was no cream of flesh—she was wearing black tights! Tights and a fragile black brassiere.

She pulled off the brassiere with a deft motion and flung it into a corner of the compartment. Her breasts were small and soft, the peaks a brownish pink. Rigid now. She stood close to him and put her firm little breasts to his lips and whispered. "Kiss me there! Oh, kiss me there!"

"I hope you are good," whispered Lady Hardesty. "Oh, I hope you are good! Because that would solve everything. If you are good in this way you will be good in other ways, too. They say you are very good in all ways, Nick Carter! For years I have been hearing about you—and now here you are! Be good to me—be good for me! If you are the one—if only you are the one! First me—and then you must kill Pendragon for me! But first me!"

Nick fought savagely to keep a clear head. Blood was pounding in his temples and the little compartment was fuzzing over. He leaned to kiss the little squiggle of umbilicus. She shuddered. Her flesh was like fire under velvet. She stroked his hair and touched his ears with her fingers. "Please," she said. "Please, Nick. I never have, you know. Hundreds of men and I never have! Sometimes I think I'm going mad!"

She fell to her knees before him. Her red mouth was twisted in torment. "Please make me, Nick! Please! I'll be your slave if you do—I'll do anything for you. Be anything! I'll never leave you—only make me feel something!"

With a little cry she dropped to the seat beside him, pulling and tugging at his body, wrapping her slim limbs about his big hard body. She wept quietly, "Only make me feel something!"

N3 had had all he could take. He took her immediately and without tenderness or mercy or even thoughtfulness. He forgot about the mission and about Hawk and about Pendragon and about the world! Everything slipped away into a red haze of animal lust. She was a bitch in heat and he was a brute male! Beneath him she twitched and moaned and wriggled and muttered little obscenities and he scarcely heard her. He rode her hard, with a building rage to rip her into bloody shreds with his spur. Lady Hardesty responded with a like frenzy. She bit him and he slapped her hard, a ringing slap, and

she laughed wildly and bit him again. He strove with bitter hatred to impale her farther. She alternated laughter with tears and sobs with gasps and moans with groans of pain and pleasure. And continued to bite him. Soon he was bleeding from a dozen spots.

Still, for all his frenzy, he paced himself carefully. Expertly. All over the world, from Singapore to Moscow, were more than a hundred living testimonials to his prowess. He needed all that experience now. And had it. Nick could sense the exact moment when he knew he had won. When he had, at long last, achieved what no other man or woman had ever been able to do—make the Lady Hardesty feel something!

It was his undoing! It smashed all his immediate plans. It plunged him instantly into deadly peril.

The lady screamed. She went into a twisting convulsion and screamed! It was the damndest scream Nick had ever heard in his life. High and shrill and full of triumph and ecstasy. It went on and on, that scream, shaking and shuddering in the little compartment. Drowning out the hoot of the laboring diesel ahead. A scream of joyous fulfillment.

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

Frantically he tried to shut her off. He clapped a big hand over her mouth. She bit it and went on wailing her pleasure. My God, thought Nick in dismay, they'll hear her up in the engine. But it was not the engineer he was worried about. It was—

And it was too late! The door of the compartment was smashed open. The gillies who had been waiting so patiently in the corridor—Pendragon's Centurions—surged into the little room. Nick fought to disentangle himself from the clinging white limbs. She would not let him go. He had only time for an absurd remembrance of the couple on the moor, and to think that irony was everywhere and that you sometimes got what you gave, when something hard crashed against his skull and he went spinning away into a dark universe. As the world exploded in white hot stars he had the curious thought that Pendragon would hate him even more for this. He would kill them both now, surely. Both himself and Lady Hardesty. But Pendragon had always had that in mind, hadn't he?

Nick Carter came back to consciousness abruptly. He knew immediately where he was and what had happened. He was alone, lying face down on the compartment floor. The Mail was still flogging along at a terrific pace, hooting and swaying and rattling. He was alone. The door had been closed and through the frosted glass Nick could see the familiar shadow still on guard. The lock was smashed, must be, but that did him no good.

He sat up and rubbed his head. There was only one thing on the

credit side—he was still alive! Slowly he got to his feet, his head still throbbing. They had racked him up but good. He explored and found his weapons gone. That figured. No Luger and no stiletto. It was a wonder they had let him keep them so long. Of course they had trusted Lady Hardesty to handle him in her own way.

The Mail plunged on through the night. Nick lit a cigarette. At least he still had the special lighter. That was going to come in handy, as he had suspected it would. He tiptoed to the door and softly tried the knob. The lock was splintered, sure enough, but they had managed to fasten it somehow on the outside. It moved half an inch inward, then stopped.

That half inch was too much. The door opened suddenly and Nick was looking into the dark eye of a heavy automatic. It was the same gillie who had been on guard from the beginning. He motioned with the mean looking Colt. “Back in wi’ ye, mon! Aye, and no tricks, mind it! Or I’ll have yer guts all over the fine carpeting, I will.”

Nick backed away. “Sorry, old fellow. Just thought I’d wander into the diner and see what’s cooking.”

The man’s hard red face cracked in a nasty smile. “Ye’ll know soon enough what’s cooking, lad. We’ll get to ye, never fear. Now back and shut yer gab!”

He pulled the door shut. Nick saw that it was fastened on the outside with a strap of some sort. Probably one of the men’s belts.

The only sign that Lady Hardesty had ever been in the compartment was her scent and a small overnighter on the luggage rack near the door. When they hauled her out they had forgotten it. Nick took it down and clicked it open. There just might be a weapon

There wasn’t any weapon. There was only a Devil’s costume and the black phallus. Nick sighed. He had been right about that, at least. Lady Hardesty was the Devil. Nick went to the single large window and let the blind zip up. Pendragon had better worry about him, he told the night rushing past outside. He wasn’t through yet, not by a long shot. They hadn’t killed him yet and that was a mistake. It was likely to be a fatal one for some of them. All—if he could arrange it.

The Mail was still running through mountains. Nick stared out at the unfriendly dark. He could see little but his own image in the glass. He began to lay out his plans. They would more than likely come in to him—they would want the privacy of the compartment for what they had in mind, no matter how friendly the train guard or how bribed the porter. They would want to make it a very secret little murder!

N3 sat down and smoked another cigarette and waited. He had it clear in his head now. Let them come. The sooner the better.

Five minutes later they came. Three of them. All big and powerful

men with raw outdoor faces and huge muscles. They surged into the little compartment and closed the door. One of them, evidently the spokesman and leader, stood with his back against the door and looked at Nick. He glanced at a watch on his wrist. When he spoke it was with the high growl of the Scottish uplands. Nick remained seated, unmoving. He did not want to provoke them into any premature moves. He did not want them to bind him. Or try to. It would upset his own schedule.

"Five minutes the noo," the leader said. He glanced back at Nick. "Sorry, lad. Nothing personal, ye'll ken. In the line of duty. Yair a sore burden to the Laird, ye'll ken. Ye have to go, lad, ye simply have to go!"

Nick nodded calmly. "I'm sorry, too. Give the Laird my best regards and thank him for his hospitality. It's been grand."

All three of them stared at him. One said: "It's a cool one you are at that! Too bad you couldn't be wi' us and not agin us! We can always use a braw lad or two."

Nick smiled faintly. "Perhaps it isn't too late even now? If you could take me to your leader?"

They laughed in unison at the poor joke. The leader glanced at his watch again. "Three minutes now."

Nick feigned interest. "What happens in three minutes?" As if he didn't know.

The leader smiled broadly. "There's a bonny trestle bridge coming up, ye'll ken. Real bonny. Two hundred feet or more it is down to the river bed."

"Aye," said another gilly. "A good two hundred 'tis— and no verry much water in the bed at that. Not this time of the year, ye'll ken."

The third man grinned at Nick. "Mostly stones, ye see. 'Tis sharp jagged stones ye'll be meeting wi' yer thick head. I doubt you'll relish the meeting, mon!"

He regarded them calmly, his eyes slightly narrowed. "What if I don't cooperate? There are three of you, yes, but I'm pretty rugged. And this is a little space—I might make it very rough for you."

The man at the door waggled the Colt at Nick. "I hope not, lad. Ye'll ken that we want this to be neat like—no ropes on you and no bullet holes. The Laird likes neat work. But if we must—weel, we must and that's all to it!"

N3 nodded. "I see. Very sensible of you. Let me know when there's only a minute left, eh? I'd like to smoke a last cigarette. It's the custom, I believe."

They all nodded. "Aye. It's a privilege you have, lad. It will not be long."

Nick stood up very slowly and cautiously. "Where's the Lady

Hardesty?"

Silence. The three men exchanged glances. It was as though Nick had spoken a magic word turning them to stone.

Then one of the gillies snickered. "She'll be safe in the next car, ye ken. Out of mischief wi' Robbie watching her. Aye—she'll no get anyplace wi' Robbie!"

The leader shot Nick a glance of reluctant admiration. "Ye seem to have gi' her what she was needing, mon! Too bad ye've got to die for it! 'Twas more than any of the likes of us could do, eh, lads?"

The other two men nodded at Nick. "Aye—she's been the rounds, has m'lady. You're the only lad could ever do her business 'til now."

The leader glanced at his watch. "Aye, 'tis all a peety. The lady has done hersel' proper this time, I'm thinking. The Laird will have her throat cut wi'out a doot! But that's no our worry—better light your last cigarette, lad. The bridge is coming up the noo—"

So this was it. Nick took the lighter from his pocket and moved a step into the center of the tiny compartment. They were all three very much on the alert, watching him with hard eyes. Nick flicked the little knob on the lighter into the ON position. He prayed fervently that the thing would work. Without it he would lose the element of surprise on which he was counting so heavily.

He put a cigarette in his mouth and pretended to try the lighter, masking the action with his palm. Nothing. He tried again, faking the action. Nothing. Nick swore and took another step toward the head gilly who was guarding the door.

Nick smiled weakly. "Fine thing! My last cigarette and the damned lighter won't work. May I have a match?"

The man's gesture was instinctive, unthinking. He took a step toward Nick and put one hand in his pocket. The Colt in his hand drooped minutely.

One of the other men said sharply, "There's no the time now, Tom! The bridge is coming up the noo—let's be done wi' it!"

Two men moved swiftly in on Nick. They had pocketed their guns and were intent on seizing him and hurling him through the window. The leader, off balance for an instant, brought up the Colt and began to step back away from Nick. "I'm sorry, lad. There'll be no—"

Nick brought up the lighter. He leveled it at the man's face as though it were a gun. "Then I'll give you a light!"

Nick Cartel said fiercely. He flicked the lighter.

Napalm is a terrible weapon! Two feet of the greasy unextinguishable liquid hell leaped into the man's face! A lance of terrifying flame under terrific pressure! Even as the leader screamed in agony his face was a charred mask, eaten to the bone by the fire!

The man fell, screaming and clawing at his face which would burn

itself away. Nick went backward as though shot out of a catapult. He had counted on the two of them rushing him, thus adding their own impetus to his tremendous bull's rush. A form of rough judo.

N3 brought his right elbow around in a stiff swinging arc. It clicked against the chin of one of the men like billiard balls striking. The big man slumped and Nick had gained a fraction of a second. He needed it. The third gilly was a fast thinker and knew how much trouble he was in. He was dragging out his pistol when Nick jumped him.

Nick's motions were a symphony in brutal overtones, a practiced surge of raw and unleashed power, the end result of months and years of rigorous training. He handled the huge, raw-boned Scot as though he were a new born babe!

A leaping, back thrusting kick in the groin! A wicked downward chop on the wrist! A murderous karate blow across the back of the neck that was just a trifle harder than he had meant it to be. As the man slumped Nick saw that he was dead! Neck broken!

He turned to meet the rush of the remaining gilly, now recovering his strength but not his wits. Had he used his gun he might have shot Nick. Instead he rushed N3 with a bellow of rage.

They were squarely in front of the window. Nick ducked, turned, and took the man over his shoulder in a judo throw. There was a ringing crash of breaking glass and flying shards as the man went through the window into the night and the abyss. The diesel whistled at that precise moment, drowning out the screams of the falling man.

Nick took one fast glance around. The man by the door had mercifully lost consciousness. His face was still smouldering, a blackened unrecognizable thing. The other man was dead of a broken neck.

Nick went into the corridor and turned right, toward the engine. Immediate object to find Lady Hardesty and get her back to this car. If the remaining gilly, Robbie, put up a fight so much the worst for him. Probably he wouldn't. There would be other passengers in the next car, no doubt, and they would all have to be careful.

But Nick had to get the Lady Hardesty back! They must talk and plan. She was his ticket to Pendragon, the only one he had. She wanted her husband dead and N3 had every intention of obliging her—in his own time and by his own method. She, Lady Hardesty, could be taken care of later!

He was just too late. Seconds too late! As he reached the swaying vestibule over the car couplings he saw the remaining gillie, Robbie, just straightening up and swinging back to the platform of the next car. He had uncoupled the last car! For reasons of their own the men had wanted it left behind!

Nick leaped forward too late. Already ten feet separated the cars. He was tempted to make the desperation leap, but decided against it. If he missed he would fall beneath the wheels of the car he now rode. It was still careening along at a good pace, though slowing. Nick stood in the vestibule and watched the rest of the London Mail drawing away. Robbie raised his hand in an ironic gesture of farewell.

The disappearing car was well lighted and Nick had a clear cut impression of what happened next. Robbie and Lady Hardesty were etched against the bright yellow light like black cardboard figures. It was a short and murderous little drama!

Robbie, waving goodbye to Nick, did not see the Lady Hardesty come up behind him. She ran at him, arms stiff before her, and pushed him off the end of the car. Nick, in the trailing car, had one glimpse of the man's terror twisted face as the wheels of the car passed over his body. A bubbling scream welled up to Nick, audible over the grind of the great trucks on the rails. Nick felt a little sickness in his stomach. Such a gracious lady, the Hardesty!

She was waving goodbye to him now. Nick lifted a hand and waved back, grim faced. Until we meet again, my dear!

Lady Hardesty blew him a kiss. Nick grinned wryly and waved again. He was not exactly in the mood for blowing kisses. He saw her reach into her purse, which she carried slung over her shoulder. He saw the glint in her hand. It was, for him, very slow thinking! Nearly fatally slow thinking. He did not realize, until the last moment, what a lovely target he made silhouetted against the lights of the rapidly slowing car.

Whinggggggggg—whanngggggggg—

Lead smashed off the car just over his head and ricocheted wildly around the vestibule. The little gun in Lady Hardesty's hand winked red again, a smug invitation to death. Whinggggggggg—

Nick cursed and dove back into the car, slamming the door behind him. A last slug slammed off the steel. Nice kid. Real nice girl! Bound to leave no witnesses, no evidence. As it was she could tell Pendragon anything she chose now, and might even be believed. His four Centurions could never tell him different.

Nick ran back to the compartment. The car was coasting nearly to a stop now. He had an idea that it would be a very smart move to get off as soon as possible.

The little compartment was reeking with the stench of burnt flesh. Nick stood looking down for a moment at the man with the blasted face. Even the bones had burnt away. Yet the man still lived. He breathed shallowly and moaned in unendurable agony that reached even into the black depths of unconsciousness.

No real pity stirred in N3. It was a quality he was very short of—

still he had never liked useless suffering. He picked up a Colt from the floor and shot the man through the head.

After the coup de grace he searched the man's pockets. He found his Luger, checked it, and stowed it back in his belt. Hugh, his little stiletto, was in the pocket of the man with the broken neck. Nick slipped it back into the chamois sheath on his forearm, which they had not taken. He checked his wallet. All in order. He found his cap and put it on, all with a growing sense of urgency for which he could not really account. Only that he wanted to get off the car!

It was moving again now. Slowly, but gaining speed every second. Going backward down the grade.

Nick ran to the rear end of the car and stood looking out and down the dark tunnel of track. He could see little. There was the wheel of an emergency brake and for a moment he considered trying to stop the car, now picking up a fearful amount of speed. He decided not. He swung himself over the rear platform, at the side, and hung there for a moment. They were in a cut now and he dared not jump. He would surely bash his brains out on the jagged rocks. Wait until they rolled out of the cut, until the grade leveled out a bit and then—

He saw that he could not wait. Below him on the steep grade, rushing at him through the night, was the glaring white eye of another engine. A following freight, no doubt, tagging along behind the London Mail. Unsuspecting.

Nick leaped. He struck hard, lost his footing and fell and rolled, feeling his clothes tear and rip. He shielded his face and head as best he could and relaxed, falling and rolling and praying he would not break a bone that would cripple him and kill the mission.

N3 ended up at the bottom of a rocky ditch. He seemed to be all in one piece. He raised his head and peered up and along the tracks. The maverick car had vanished around a bend. He waited and listened, a wincing expression on his face. He was thinking that the mission was beginning to turn bloody indeed. The corpses were beginning to pile up. Now, in a second or two, there would be more—innocent trainmen.

N3 sighed and waited. No help for it. If he didn't bring down Pendragon there would be more corpses than a thousand men could count in a thousand days. He—

It came! The sound reverberated through the surrounding hills like a million kettie drums banged by giants. One long continuous crashing sound! A pillar of blue and red flame shot into the air half a mile from where N3 lay in the ditch.

Slowly he got up. He checked his weapons once more. He began to walk down the tracks, away from the wreck. Time to go. Ian Travers was still waiting for him in London. Time was running very short.

And, as of the moment, Pendragon was still winning.

Chapter 8

THE DRUM AND MONKEY

Six o'clock Tuesday evening, November 9, 1965.

The wintry dusk had fallen early on the sooty head of central London. The lamps along the Embankment were yellow balloons in the murk, each with its nimbus of mist from the steaming Thames, a fore-token of the fog to come soon. Traffic on the great river had already slowed in the rising mist as tugs and steamers hooted and growled and felt for each other in the increasing obscurity.

The tall man walked with a weary limp. He turned off the Strand onto Lancaster Place, past the looming bulk of Somerset House. He ambled past the Thames Police Station, glancing once at the blue lamp and grinning faintly. He didn't particularly care to encounter a Bobby at the moment. His wallet was still full enough, but his clothes had pretty well had it. He'd probably be run in on suspicion.

He came to Waterloo Bridge and turned right along the Embankment, stopping to light a cigarette—with the lighter very carefully turned back to OFF—and gazed longingly at a bench. He could certainly do with a breather. He was hungry and thirsty and damned beat up. It had been a long hard trek. He had avoided trains and the main roads.

N3 walked on past the bench. No rest for the wicked— or for an AXE agent on a crucial mission. Only four days now until Pendragon's ultimatum expired. The big man's face hardened beneath the crust of dirt and stubble. He had been on a treadmill so far. Getting nowhere. He was farther from Blackscape Island, and Pendragon, than he had been in the beginning! He could only pray that Ian Travers had come up with something workable.

His goal was Cleopatra's Needle. There would be a sidewalk artist working beside the monolith. So the coded instructions had said. N3 hastened his steps, trying not to think of Gwen Leith and what they had done to her with the snake. There was no time for pity—no time for mercy— there was no time for anything now but killing!

It was very late, and too dark, for the sidewalk artists to be at work. Sketching their ephemeral little chalks for the tourist shilling. They would long since have quit work for solace in the nearest pub. And yet his orders had been explicit enough.

Nick came to the Needle. There was one artist still at work beneath

a light, a legless man in a wooden dolly propelled by skate wheels. He was busily sketching away on the pavement while a little cluster of people watched without much interest.

N3 moved through the scant crowd and stood looking down at the artist. The man's legs were missing just below the hips, the stubs enclosed in leather boots. His hands moved deftly as he sketched the face and head of a pretty girl. Nick glanced around. There were no females present. Obviously the man had no commission, was merely doodling the time away.

"Bet you can't draw a picture of my wife," Nick said in a harsh voice.

The man did not so much as glance at him. He went on drawing. "Bet I can," he said. "Can you tell me what she looks like?"

"I can," replied Nick. "Like a bloody hatchet! Like a blooming axe—you just draw a hatchet and put ears on it and you got her true to life!" One of the onlookers giggled.

"That's easy enough." The artist picked up a rag and erased the girl's face. He began to sketch an outline of a hatchet. "Comes sort of expensive, though, hatchets do. What'll you pay?"

"A clipped florin," said Nick. "That's all she's worth."

The man laughed. "Done. Money first." Rapidly he began to draw the picture of a hatchet faced woman.

Nick handed him a florin. The man reached for the two-shilling bit. Nick took the tiny square of rolled up rice paper, palmed it, and after a moment drifted away. He paused to light a cigarette beneath a street lamp. No one was paying particular attention to him. It was probably all right, and the security mumbo-jumbo was a waste of time, but with Pendragon you couldn't afford to make mistakes. He had already learned that. He pretended that his cigarette would not stay lit and flicked the lighter again, palming the note as he did so. He read it by the lighter's tiny flame.

The Drum and Monkey—Bridle Lane—Soho—Pickup Pamela at bar—Time's A wasting—

Nick grinned faintly at the Americanism. Travers must read the comic strips. He crumpled the note into a ball and flicked it into the oily Thames. Soho. The Greenwich Village of London. Well, damned if he'd walk it!

He trudged down to Villiers Street and back over to the Strand. Out of long habit he let the first two taxis pass, then hailed the third. He gave the man directions, then settled back into the comfortable, clean smelling leather with a sigh. He had a very good idea that he wasn't going to get any sleep tonight. N3 breathed deeply and made himself relax, felt the great muscles letting down for a moment. He allowed himself to slide off into a Yoga-like trance, resting, but not

daring to go all the way. Ten minutes of Yoga, he knew, would have done wonders for him. But this was not the time nor place.

Who, he wondered, is Pamela. A fragment of Shakespeare flitted through his mind: Who is Silvia? What is she?

Who is Pamela?

Pamela turned out to be a fat blondined whore sitting at the frowzy bar of the Drum and Monkey. It was a cruddy pub in a crummy district and was, seemingly, frequented only by tarts and their ponces. Protectors. Nick sank wearily on a stool and ordered a pint of bitter. That, at least, would look and taste good. As the grubby bar maid worked the long handled pump he asked for Pamela. Before she could answer him a hand tapped his shoulder and he got a killing whiff of cheap perfume. He turned on the stool.

"I'm Pamela, love. I been waiting for yer. It's late, love.

Better drink your bitter and come along with me now. I've got a lovely room upstairs, I 'ave."

Nick was damned if he'd leave until he'd finished his beer. He was parched. He drank fast and surveyed her over the rim of the glass. He hoped to God he was in the right pub, doing the right thing. He'd hate to end up in bed with this one, even if he had the time or the inclination. She was a horror. Fat, sloppy, too old and too much cheap makeup. The frizzled hair with its bad dye job looked like a haystack.

Pamela twitched at his arm impatiently. "Come along now, love. You've 'ad yer drink. Remember what I always say—for there is good news yet to hear and fine things to be seen!"

She had obviously memorized the words. She spoke them like a well trained parrot. Her watery bloodshot eyes scrutinized Nick.

"I know," he said wearily. "I know—before we get to Paradise by way of Kensal Green." He got up from the stool and followed her out into a narrow corridor smelling of disinfectant. No one had paid them the slightest attention.

Nick watched her fat behind wobble up the stairs ahead of him. She was wheezing hard. "Me ticker ain't what it was," she told him cheerfully. "We got to go all the way up. Fourth floor back."

She led him to a door directly under a filthy skylight. She knocked. Ian Travers' voice said, "Come."

The fat whore patted Nick's arm. "Goodbye, love. I've done my job."

Nick slipped into the dingy little room while Travers peered into the corridor. He stroked his bald head and stared at N3. "You do look like you've been through the grinder, at that! In fact you look rather a mess. That's good. We'll get rid of that expensive cap, and the tie and shirt, and you'll look about right for your role. Those tweeds have taken enough punishment to look the part, and I've got some other

shoes for you.”

Nick rubbed the stubble on his face. “No chance of shaving?”

Travers went to a corner and came back with a large pigskin bag. He put it on a wobbly deal table in the middle of the room. “No chance at all! That beard is invaluable. That and the dirt. We’ll just leave them alone, I think. But all that later. We’re very pressed for time, you know. So while I’m getting this gear sorted you tell me your adventures. Keep it brief, please.”

Nick told him everything that had occurred from the wrecking of the Cynara to the present. Travers did not once interrupt. When Nick had finished the Special Branch man poured half a tumbler of scotch and handed it to him. The bottle had come out of the pigskin bag, along with numerous other articles. Travers pointed to a chair and pulled one up to the table himself. He fixed himself a sparse drink and held up his glass in a toasting gesture. His protuberant blue eyes were flinty, his florid face impassive. “To Jim Stockes,” he said. “He was our best. Thank you for—for killing him, old man. I shouldn’t like to think of Jim burning to death.” He rubbed his eyes and the bald head and Nick sensed the infinite weariness in the man.

Travers put his glass down with a little thump. “Well, that’s all past now. Let’s get to business! I told you in code that we’ve found a back way into the rat’s nest—I think we may still bring it off. We’re going to try to get you into Blackscape Island, Nick. Killing Pendragon can wait. First things first—and the firstest of all, excusing the bad grammar, is to blow up those missiles. Now please listen carefully.” Travers glanced at his wrist. “We’re operating on a tight schedule. In two hours time we’ve got to have you on your way to prison! Dartmoor, in the south of England! Your fellow prisoner in the van will be one Alfie McTurk. He’s one of Pendragon’s bully boys, one of the enforcers. Centurions, they are called.”

N3 nodded grimly. “I know. I’ve just killed three of them, remember. Mrs. Pendragon took care of the fourth.”

Ian Travers sipped his drink and stared at the cracked ceiling. “Yes—too bad the thing with Lady Hardesty couldn’t work out! You might have gotten straight through to Pendragon.”

“I doubt it. He doesn’t trust her at all. She’s more or less a prisoner herself. Or she was, as I explained. God knows what she’ll do now that she’s on her own.”

Travers lit a cigarette and tossed the pack across to Nick. “She won’t be on the loose for long. He’ll get her. His people are everywhere now—coming out of the woodwork and crawling out from under rocks. Like slugs! We can forget Lady Hardesty for the moment. Let’s concentrate on Alfie McTurk—he who is going to be your prison mate and, I hope, your ticket into Blackscape.”

Nick Carter finished his scotch and looked longingly at the bottle, then decided against it. It wouldn't make him drunk—he never got drunk. But it might make him sleepy. Even sleepier than he was. He sighed heavily and lit a cigarette. "Okay," he said. "Tell me about Alfie McTurk."

Ian Travers talked for half an hour. N3 listened, asking a question now and then. Finally he was satisfied. "It just might work," he admitted.

Travers rubbed his bloodshot eyes. The pouches beneath them were a purplish gray. "It's got to work," he said quietly. "It's all we've got! The last shot in our locker! Pendragon is still holding all the trumps. His intelligence work is fantastically good—he seems to know what we're doing while we're still thinking about it!" He swept a hand around at the grubby little room. "That's why we have to go through all this—I wouldn't dare have you at the Yard! He would know about it within the hour."

Nick nodded. "He knew when I left Washington."

Travers' answering nod was grim. "I know. I suspected as much at the time but there was no point in going into it. Oh, I don't think I told you—one of his people called me at the Yard this morning! They've got Gwen Leith, as you know. Pendragon's message—from one of his Centurion's, actually—was that they're holding her as a hostage for our good behavior. Your good behavior, actually. If you make one more attempt to penetrate their organization they're going to kill her—slowly and painfully was the way he explained it."

Nick stared at Ian Travers. The Special Branch man shrugged and said: "Too bad, really. She was a nice girl and a fine agent. I'll hate to lose her."

"She struck me as being more than just an agent," said N3. "I'd bet she's pretty high in your organization."

Travers' ice blue eyes were inscrutable. Nick knew he was out of line and shrugged inwardly. This Travers was nearly on a par with Hawk, his own chief, when it came to hard cases!

Travers pulled the pigskin bag toward him on the table. "Let's get on with it," he said curtly. "I've got a cap for you, and another shirt and a pair of shoes. Better start changing. You're due down in the bar in fifteen minutes to start your brawl with the police. Remember you're to make it look good—it may be unnecessary but we can't risk any slips. In any case it will help you get into your part, your role as a renegade Irishman. Remember that you're a very hard case! One of the last of the old IRA types. For you the Irish Republican Army will never die, and can do no wrong!"

Travers broke off to stare at Nick. "I suppose you can fake a convincing brogue? It's not much good if you can't."

Nick grinned wearily at him. "Don't worry about that at all, at all! I'm a broth of a boyo and I hate the English worse than I hate sin or Protestants! Sure and I'd love to blow up Buckingham Palace, I would that!"

Ian Travers smiled faintly. "Not too bad. But don't overplay it. Alfie McTurk is pretty stupid, a big dumb murderous lout, but he'll be on his guard. He's worried, as well he might me. He's in trouble with us and he's in more trouble with Pendragon and the Druids. Their discipline is stiff and McTurk has broken the rules—but I told you ah that."

As they talked Nick had been slipping out of the late Major Camberwell's good quality shirt and tie. He donned the sleazy, dirty blue and white striped shirt that was handed him. He knotted a soiled handkerchief around his neck and pulled on the greasy cloth cap.

Travers nodded in approval. "You'll do. Just don't shave or wash until you absolutely must. You should get by. Insofar as we know the Lady Hardesty is the only one in the Druid organization, alive, who knows what you really look like." The Special Branch man looked inquiringly at Nick. "You haven't any pictures floating around, by chance?"

N3 shook his head. He could not resist just a touch of the rapier. "You should know better than that, sir. When I joined AXE even my baby pictures were burnt!"

"There are such things as street photographers," Travers said dryly, "but we'll have to risk it. Externals aren't too important anyway, as long as they serve to get you into Blackscape. If you make it they'll strip you down and put you into a Druid uniform in any case—which reminds me, give me your weapons! You're going to have to go into this pretty naked. Weapons would make them suspicious at once. Hard lines, I know, but there it is. Come on, give!"

Nick slid the Luger across the table. "Goodbye, Wilhelmina," he murmured. "Be faithful to me." He unbuckled the chamois sheath from his arm and tossed it after the Luger. Travers was right. He did feel a little naked without the Luger and the stiletto.

Travers was watching him. "That's all?"

"That's all." Nick lied easily. There was one more shot of napalm in the cigarette lighter and he meant to keep it. It was hands across the sea and all that, of course, but sometimes one kept secrets even from cousins. The lighter wouldn't compromise him—he could always say he stole it.

Travers scooped the weapons into his bag. "I sincerely hope," he said matter of factly, "that I can give them back to you one day soon. Now take off your shoes, please. And hurry."

Nick handed over the Major's well worn walking boots. Travers

took a pair of shoddy black oxfords from the suitcase. "Observe closely," he told Nick. "Both heels twist off. Just so."

He twisted the rubber heels off both shoes. The heels were hollowed out. Travers pointed to the right heel. "Wiring and detonaters. Very fine wire—they've gotten twenty feet of it packed in there." He picked up the left heel and showed it to Nick. "Fulminate caps. I shouldn't advise you to bounce too hard on your heels!"

"I'll try to remember."

Travers screwed the heels back in place and tossed them to Nick. "Put them on. Now I'll show you the piece de resistance, as it were."

From his pocket he took a worn leather tobacco pouch and a scarred, filthy smelling cutty pipe. "From now on," he said, "you're a pipe smoker. Get rid of all your cigarettes, if you have any. And give me the Major's wallet while you're at it."

Nick did so. Travers handed him another wallet, thin and ragged. "No need to check it now. It's an expert job, got everything you'll need or should have. Now about this tobacco pouch—"

He zipped open the pouch. A smell of cheap burley came from it. "Watch," said Travers. "If you have to do this at all you'll have to do it fast." He inserted three fingers into the pouch and lifted. The inner lining and tobacco came out in his hand. He tilted the pouch to show Nick what was in the hollow below the false lining. It was neatly and firmly packed in and looked like a child's modeling clay.

"Plastique," said Travers. "Enough to blow up half of London. You know how to use it, of course?"

N3 nodded. He did indeed. AXE had run a special course for the top men in the use of plastique.. He remembered it only too well. They had lost a very good agent who had used it carelessly.

"Good. I only hope to God you get to use it—in time!"

Travers put the outer skin and tobacco back in the pouch and handed it and the scurvy pipe to Nick. "I guess that's it. Now we'll have a look at the map. Then I'll check you over a last time and then you can go down to the bar and get arrested. Remember you must make it look genuine! Our chaps are expecting it. We've got special men laid on for the job. Don't be afraid of hurting them!"

"I won't," said Nick. "I have to protect myself, don't I? No fancy work, I suppose? No karate or judo or savate?"

Travers looked annoyed. "God, no! You're just a big dumb Irish renegade! Just your fists, man! You're not supposed to know any of the sophisticated nonsense! Now stand up and let me take a last look at you, check you out."

Two minutes later the Special Branch man nodded. "I guess you'll do. Better get on with it now. Luck and God bless!" He shook hands with Nick and watched him out the door.

Five minutes later N3 was sitting at the frowzy bar of the Drum and Monkey again, drinking yet another pint of bitter. He was exchanging a few words with the bar maid, practicing his accent, when he saw her eyes widen. She was looking over his shoulder. She leaned forward to whisper.

“Busies, love! Tecs. I can tell by their bloody feet. Mind your manners now.”

A big hand was clapped on Nick’s shoulder. He was spun around. A hefty looking plain clothes detective with a hard face was smirking at him.

“Your name Mitchell? Sean Mitchell?”

His new name. Nick scowled at the man. “That’s as might be,” he said in his best low Irish brogue. “And what’s it to yer anyway?”

The hand tightened on his shoulder. “Might be a lot, mate. Come along. You’re wanted for a few questions.”

Nick shook off the hand and stood up. Every eye in the pub was on him. “That will be the bloody day,” he said harshly. “That will be the bleeding day, when Sean Mitchell goes along peacefully with any ruddy English copper!”

He hit the detective squarely in the face.

Chapter 9

FOUL DEED

The prison van left London at midnight, heading for the grim prison of Dartmoor in Devonshire. The fog had come up as expected and the going was agonizingly slow as the van groped its way through the yellowish pea soup. It would be after dawn, at least, before they left the plain and climbed to the stark and rolling moor where the accident was to occur. Travers had planned it for a place called Two Bridges, just to the northeast of Princeton and the prison. A truck was to smash into the prison van there. The guards and the truck driver—also a policeman in disguise—were to feign injuries and unconsciousness. Nick— now Sean Mitchell—and his comrade in manacles, Alfie McTurk, would be afoot on the moor. Escaping. Nick was to take it from there.

Alfie McTurk was a Druid, a Centurion in fact, one of Pendragon's tough boys. It seemed logical that he would immediately contact his organization and ask for help. It was the thin edge of the wedge, the shoehorn in the heel. Or so Travers hoped.

One thing had worried the man from Special Branch. He explained it to Nick. Alfie McTurk was on the spot! In deadly trouble with the Druids. He had gotten drunk and pulled a smash and grab job on his own and gotten caught. A serious breach of discipline. And Druids who disobeyed orders were punished swiftly and without mercy. The question was—did Alfie McTurk realize just how much trouble he was in?

“He's got the body of an ox,” Travers had explained. “And the brain too! Still he may realize that he's safer away from the Druids! He may not try to contact them. It's for you to guide him a bit, N3.”

Now, as the prison van rolled slowly southwest through the night and fog, Nick coverdy studied the huge man seated across from him. They had hardly spoken so far. Nick was playing the silent and sullen bit, and McTurk stared at the floor of the van most of the time, twisting his big gnarled hands and scowling. He did, Nick thought now, look remarkably like a gorilla! He was tall and wide shouldered and thick in the chest. His dark hair was thick and grew low on his forehead. His eyes were small and cunning and set too close together. He was as roughly dressed as Nick himself, still in his civilian clothes. They would not be given prison garments until they reached Dartmoor.

Nick glanced at the steel netting over the rear door of the van. They weren't going to reach Dartmoor, of course, but Alfie McTurk didn't know that. The doors were padlocked, right enough, but the lock had been filed three quarters through.

"If the doors don't burst of their own accord," Travers had explained, "just give them a good kick. They'll give."

Nick thought it was about time to make a move. He had to win McTurk's confidence. The van hit a hole in the road and sent both men flying and Nick seized the opportunity. He loosed a string of fearful Irish curses and kicked at the walls of the van. He slammed his fist against the partition separating them from the two guards in front.

"Sure and why'n't yer watch yer ruddy driving, you gutless spalpeens! Yer trying to break our screwing necks. Stupid bloody English sods!" He slammed the partition again with his fist.

McTurk was watching him. Nick thought he detected a glint of admiration in the little eyes. It was about time. When they had been loaded into the van Nick had put up a terrific scuffle, hitting and kicking the guards, but McTurk had not appeared to be impressed. Now he seemed to be. He fished a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his pocket, lit one, and tossed the pack across the van to Nick. "Yer a rough one and that's for sure," said Alfie McTurk. "What's yer name, cock?" He had the whine of Bow Bells in his voice. Travers had explained that the man was a Cockney.

Nick flung the pack of cigarettes back at the man, hoping he wasn't overdoing it. But he could not appear too anxious to make friends.

"Keep your ruddy cigarettes," he snarled in his best Irish tones. "If it's cigarettes I'm wanting I'll have me own, thank you."

McTurk picked up the pack and proffered it again. He now seemed anxious to talk. Over his beede browed, pushed in face—his nose had been badly broken and badly set—crept an expression that Alfie probably thought of as friendly.

"That's no wye to be, mate! Come off it now. We're gorn to clink together, ain't we? We might even be cell mates. So might as well be friendly, I sye. Might even do each other a bit of good, comes the chance. And it might come, it might." A cunning look stole over Alfie's concave features. "I got friends, I 'ave. I've no mind to spend seven years in the bleeding Moor!"

Nick glared at him, but he was heartened. It was a hint, nothing more, but a hint that Alfie would welcome any chance to escape. He reached for a cigarette, still growling curses. "Me name is Sean Mitchell, if it's anything to do with you atall!"

Alfie nodded. He relaxed, crossed his thick legs and blew smoke. "I'm Alfie McTurk, I am. The Beak give me seven for smash and grab. A jewelers in the Strand. I'd a gotten away with it, too, only I was

drunk at the time. A real skinfool, I had."

Nick looked at him with contempt which was not hard to produce. "Fool! Only a bloody fool would operate when he's drinking. But then you bloody Limeys never could drink proper—takes an Irishman to do that!"

McTurk chose to ignore that. He was now determined to be friendly with this big renegade Irishman with the burning bloodshot eyes. The truth about Alfie McTurk was that he was a natural bully, and at heart a coward, and he was lonely and frightened. Nick sensed all this and let the big hoodlum talk on and on. It was mostly braggadocio. Nick sat and smoked and listened to the endless stream of boasts and thought, with a sly quirk of his mind, that a modern psychiatrist would have stamped Alfie as basically insecure! Nick had to chuckle at that. Even Alfie didn't suspect just how insecure he was at the moment!

The ride was interminable. It began to rain, sloshing at the top and sides of the van with gray whips and blowing in the two small windows. It got very cold in the van. Nick turned up the collar of his ruined tweed jacket and pretended to sulk. Impatience buzzed in him like an electric current. Let's get this show on the road!

At last they were through Exeter. Moretonhampstead. Grimspound. Postbridge.

Nick was alert now for the signal. The driver was to sound his horn in a certain manner when they were a mile east of Two Bridges. Nick peered out a window and, as the road curved, he could see a faint line of daybreak behind them. It was still raining lightly.

The driver sounded his horn. Two longs, a short, two longs. One mile to go!

Nick looked across at Alfie McTurk. The big man had fallen into silence at last and was staring morosely at the floor. Bragging or no, he seemed at last to have realized that he was headed for Dartmoor and seven years hard labor.

"You got another cigarette?" asked Nick. He was bracing himself as best he could. The collision was coming up now, any moment, and Travers had promised it would be a good one. Authentic. "You'll know it," he had said grimly. "They'll bowl you arse over endways!"

Alfie reached into his pocket and brought out a crumpled packet. He flung it to the floor in disgust. "All gorn! Whyn't yer bring yer own bleeding fags, mate? I ain't no ruddy tobacco shop, I—"

It came! A long squeal of tortured brakes and then a slamming jolt of truck meeting van! Nick was expecting it, still he was hurled across the van to land on top of Alfie. The van veered into a ditch and turned over with a crash.

N3 saw that McTurk was dazed. He grabbed his arm and pulled

him toward the rear doors. "Come on!" he yelled. "Maybe we got a chance! Let's run for it!"

The steel mesh doors still held. Nick gave them a vicious, well directed kick and they flew open. He crawled out into the ditch, pulling Alfie after him. It was barely light and the rain was falling heavier now. The van was on its side in the ditch, its two topmost wheels still spinning. Across the road a heavy truck was slewed into another ditch, nose buried, lights still blazing across the moor. There was no sign of life from either vehicle. The police were playing their roles well.

Nick grabbed at Alfie's arm. No time to waste. He didn't want to give the man time to think. "Run!" Nick yelled. "Run, damn it. We can hide out on the moor!"

To the west he saw a scattering of houses and a church steeple. Two Bridges. A mental photostat of Travers' map flashed through his brain. He wanted to go north! Into the most desolate sector of the moors.

Nick ran across the road and leaped the ditch near the wrecked truck. He glanced over his shoulder. Alfie McTurk was coming after him. Nick concealed his grin and began to run for all he was worth.

N3 was in superb condition, as he always was, and so had to trim his pace to suit the blundering Alfie. Even so it was fifteen minutes before he paused and flung himself down in the heather on the far side of a gentle ridge that would conceal them from the road. There would be no pursuit, but McTurk couldn't know that.

McTurk was utterly spent. He lay in the sodden heather and sobbed for breath. The rain had increased, a miserable gray net, and heavy mist was rolling in from the south. Nick left Alfie to catch his breath and crawled to the top of the opposite ridge, adjusting himself to the role of hunted creature. Alfie McTurk was the key to Pendragon! An unlikely key, but the only one they had. One mistake could ruin everything. And there was the terrible and incessant pressure of Time!

Nick peered over the ridge. Something dark moved along the little valley below him. Nick tensed, then saw what it was and relaxed. Moor ponies. Wild creatures, as desolate and alone in the rain as himself and Alfie. He raised his eyes again and began searching the forlorn horizon. For a moment the rain slackened and Nick saw something glimmering white in the distance. A house? A cottage? He couldn't be sure. But it was worth a try. He went back to where Alfie was still gasping in the heather. He kicked the big man roughly in the ribs.

"Sure and 'tis all day yer going to spend there? Come on, man! They'll have the warders and the dogs out by now. We daren't loaf

here. Come on—time to run again!”

Alfie got slowly to his feet, holding his side. “Me breath’s gorn, cock! Gorn for fair, it is. I got a stitch as is killing me! What say we just walk it, easy like?” He glanced around at the mist rolling in. “They’ll never find us in this pea souper.”

“Ar,” said Nick savagely. “They’ll not find us! And we’ll never find our way off the cursed moor, either! I say come on now, or I’m leaving you. Maybe I’d better anyway— I’ll be better off alone! You’re not man enough to keep up!”

“No, mate!” Alfie glanced around fearfully at the rain and mist. “Don’t leave me, cock! I’ll keep up.”

“Then come on. We’ll head north. I thought I saw a house that way. Might be we can find some help there—or help ourselves! That’s as may be. So come or stay!” Nick swung around and began to walk rapidly to the north. He could hear Alfie puffing along behind him.

Alfie saved his breath to climb the next ridge. But on the descent he said, “You seen an ‘ouse, mate?”

Nick nodded curtly. “I thought I did! Mist has hidden it now, but I got a line on it.”

Silence. Heavy breathing. Then, with a note of low cunning in his voice Alfie said, “Yer suppose an ‘ouse out here would have a blower? A ruddy telephone?”

“Not likely,” Nick said. But he was pleased. Very pleased. Alfie was thinking along the right lines at last. Thinking about making a contact, asking for help! Nick found himself hoping the house did have a phone! Otherwise he would have to stick to plan and walk all the way to the tiny village of Tavy Cleave where there was a public phone. Fifteen miles. With the chances good that they would lose their way in the mist and circle back. No man without a compass could keep his bearings in a moor mist! And of course he had not brought a compass—it would have made even a stupid ox like Alfie suspicious.

They came at last to a ridge overlooking a gentle slope and the house Nick had seen. It was a small, white painted cottage and, to his relief and surprise, Nick saw a solitary telephone wire leading in from the north. The wire was strung on glass insulators atop short poles, just out of reach of the moor ponies. Strange, thought N3. A phone, but no electric lines. Well, there must be a good reason for it. He pulled Alfie down into a clump of dead bracken.

“Let’s not go busting straight down there, atall! We’ll lie here and study a bit first—might even be a warder’s house! And he’ll have a gun.”

Alfie had seen the telephone wire. His growl was excited and full of triumph. “Ar—he might. If he’s to home. And if he is, mate, and if he ‘as a gun I’m the man to shove it up his craw! You see that phone

line, cock? Ar—that's gorn get us out of this, it is!"

Nick pretended indifference and weariness. The latter he did not have to simulate. He was utterly beat. His yawn was quite genuine.

"Sure," he agreed cynically. "The blower will help a lot. I don't think! Maybe you're gonna call Buckingham Palace and ask Her Majesty to send us a pardon air mail? 'Tis the opium dreams you're having, friend!"

Alfie scowled at him. "Yer don't know everything, Mitchell! I told yer I got friends. Now if you'll shut up and string along with Alfie I'll get yer out of this!"

"Okay," said Nick. "I'll be pleased to see how you—"

"Shhhhhh—" Alfie grabbed at his sleeve and pointed down to the cottage. "Cor lumme, look! A woman! A young woman!"

Nick Carter, alias Sean Mitchell, felt his heart give a sickening little twitch. He had not counted on this. Nor had Travers. How could they? A young woman out here alone! It was trouble and N3 knew it instandy. No mistaking the note in Alfie McTurk's voice. Nick felt sicker. He had to play along with Alfie! Couldn't afford to cross or antagonize him. Not yet. Not until Alfie made his contact!

Alfie was on his feet and striding down hill through the rain. Nick followed. The woman had seen them now and was standing just outside her door, watching them approach without apparent alarm. Nick cursed. My God! She must be either an innocent or a complete fool!

The girl—she was little more than that—must have been a little of both. Not until the last moment did she realize the possible danger from these two rough looking men. She dropped the bowl of chicken feed she had been carrying and ran for the cottage door.

Alfie had her in two great bounds. "Na, then," he laughed harshly. "Yer needn't be afraid of us, missus. Not yet anyways. Are yer all alone in there?" He twisted one of her arms up behind her back, holding her as easily as though she were a rag doll.

She had spirit. She writhed and kicked at the big man. "You let me go," she demanded. She kicked McTurk on the ankle. "My husband will come and kill you for sure, he will that!" She spoke in a thick Devon accent. She was plump and well built, wearing a clean house dress. Her breasts were firm heavy bulges against the flimsy cloth.

Alfie grabbed one of her breasts in a big hand and squeezed it hard. The girl screamed. Alfie grinned down at her. "I asked yer a question, missus. Yer husband to home?" He squeezed again, this time adding a cruel twisting motion.

The girl screamed again. "No— no! Oh, stop! You're hurting me— no, no—my husband ain't to home! H—he's at the prison! He works there. Oh—please don't!"

Nick acted fast. Alfie was a slow thinking moron. If he could get the upper hand and keep him off balance—

He pulled the girl away from Alfie and pushed her into the cottage. To the gaping Alfie he said, "Leave her alone! For now." He winked at Alfie. "Later we'll have our fun with her, all right, but let's get out of the open, man! Let's get warm and dry and see if they've got anything to drink! And smoke. See if there's any money about, eh? Then you can make that call on the blower. Come on, now!"

Alfie scowled at Nick. "And what makes yer the boss of a sudden like, cock?"

Nick passed it off with a grin. He gave the big man a friendly little push, hoping he could bring it off without butting heads. If it came right down to cases he would have to let Alfie have the woman! He would hate that!

"Go on with yer now," he said. He grinned again. "Plenty of time for her later. We're likely to be here all day, man. Go see if you can find any whisky—I've a marvelous thirst on me."

Alfie had brightened at the mention of booze. Still grumbling, he disappeared down a short hallway leading into a tiny kitchen. "See if you can find a bit of clothes line or such," Nick called after him. "We'd best tie her up."

He could feel the girl trembling. He pushed her into a tidy, airless little parlor. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Don't make any trouble," he told her. "Don't talk and don't ask questions! I think I can handle him, but it's mostly up to you. We'll have to tie you up and gag you, of course, but you'll be all right if you obey me. Just keep absolutely quiet and out of his notice. Do you understand?"

Her brown eyes were wide with terror. But she nodded and gasped, "Y—yes. I'll do as I'm bid. Only don't let him come near me, sir! I'm not to bide his touch!"

Alfie McTurk came into the parlor. He was carrying a tangle of clothesline and an open bottle of whiskey. "Look what I found," he crowed. He tossed the bottle to Nick and crossed to where the girl cringed in the chair. "Na, then, missus! Old Alfie'll show yer a little something about knots, he will." He turned to wink at Nick. "Learned when I was a ruddy Boy Scout, yer know!"

Nick glanced at the level of the whisky in the bottle. Alfie had had three or four drinks. A spark of hope flashed in N3. That might be the answer! Maybe he could save the girl. Big Alfie evidently liked his booze. He had, after all, been drunk when the bobbies got him for the smash and grab job!

Alfie took his time binding the girl. Nick had to stand and watch. He put his hands to his lips and shook his head at her as she squirmed beneath Alfie's roaming hands. When Alfie had finished with his knots

he thrust a big hand up under her dress. She opened her mouth to scream. Nick stepped hastily forward and jammed his dirty handkerchief into her mouth. Brutally. It could not be helped.

Nick finished gagging the girl and took Alfie's arm. "Come on, then. Let's get in some work on the bottle. And it's starving I am, too. And wet. We'll dry out and make our plans, Alfie." He steered the man deftly out of the room. Alfie went reluctantly, glancing back at the girl and licking his lips, but he said nothing. Nick, without appearing to notice, saw the cunning side-long glance Alfie gave him.

There was a gasoline stove in the neat kitchen. They lit all the burners and soon their sodden clothes were steaming. Alfie was hitting the botde hard and Nick pretended to keep up with him. He had been really drunk only once in his life, when he was very young, but this time he wasn't so sure. Utter fatigue and booze made a deadly combination. But whisky was his best bet to keep Alfie under control.

They found bread and cheese and cold meat and sat at the table and wolfed the food down. Nick began to breathe a little easier. Alfie seemed content for the moment. In fact he seemed to have fallen into what, for Alfie Mc Turk, must pass as deep thought. Nick could almost hear the crude gears clicking over in the big fellow's primitive brain. Alfie was trying to make up his mind about something!

Nick thought he knew what it was. He took another drink, then left the table and went to a window. Behind the cottage, to the north, the moor stretched flat and black in the gusting rain. It had been swaled, burnt over during the early summer to make better pasturage for sheep, and the heather and furze were dark and stubbly. A plane, thought N3, could land there without difficulty. A light plane.

Alfie could not have read his thoughts. It was sheer coincidence that he said: "You ever hear of the Druids, mate?"

Nick turned very slowly. It would not do to appear too ignorant. Alfie was an ox, but he had his share-of animal cunning.

"Seems I have," Nick said slowly. "Read about them, anyway. Ain't they against the government and all?"

Alfie nodded. He drank heavily from the whisky botde. "Ar—they are that! Going to take it over, too, comes time!"

Nick was skeptical, but not too skeptical. He grinned.

"I heard a lot of big talk in my time, Alfie. Always comes to nothing. Even in Ireland we've got the big mouths, talking and yapping and nothing to come of it but blarney and blood!

Alfie chomped on a mouthful of bread and cheese. "Somethin' will come of this, mate. I'm a Druid. I know!"

Nick grinned and spat on the floor. "And I'm the bloody Prince of Wales, I am and for sure! Let's drink and plan, Alfie, and forget the blather."

Alfie looked hurt. "Blather, is it? I'll show yer. I'm a Druid, I tells yer. More than that, I'm a Centurion, cock! A leader. I got me own band of bully lads, I have. And I'm asking you straight out—yer want to come with me and jom the Druids? Good pay and plenty of loot for them as earns it!"

Skillfully Nick let some of his skepticism fade. A look of growing respect crept over his face. "Damned if I don't think you're telling the truth, Alfie boy."

Alfie looked pleased. "Strike me, I am! Of course," he added importantly, "yer'll have to tike orders. From me. Starting right now."

Nick allowed himself to be more impressed. "I'll take orders," he said. "If you can get us off this bleeding moor and give me a chance to hit the cruddin' English, I'll take orders from the Devil himself!"

The thought of Lady Hardesty flitted through his mind. Lady Hardesty and the obscene black phallus. Where was the nymphomaniac lady now?

Alfie got up. He staggered a little. He held up a hand. "One phone call will do it, cock. You'll see."

For an added stamp of the genuine Nick said, "Be careful. This ain't London! The call will have to go through some village exchange with a lot of nosey peepers about."

Alfie was by now very drunk. He waved a careless hand as he left the room. The phone was in the hallway on a taboret. Nick started to follow, but Alfie waved him back. "You'll bide, mate. You're not to hear. Secret, this is."

But Nick stood and watched through a cracked door as Alfie made the call. He did not so much as glance at the closed parlor door. When he came back to the kitchen Nick was again at the table having a drink. Alfie slumped into his chair. "Nothing to it. Anyways I had to take a chance. The plane will be here come dusk. Just at dusk, cock, when he can still see to land!"

Nick's look was one of undisguised admiration. "Plane? You mean someone is sending a plane for you—for us?"

"Told yer," said Alfie proudly. He reached for the bottle. "We got to burn a cross at dusk, so's he'll know where to come down." He shot a glance at the stove. "Should be plenty of petrol for that thing. It'll do fine. We'll get some sheets and clothes, anything as will burn, and lay a cross out on the moor. Nothing to it, like I say!" He stood up and yawned hugely. He winked at Nick. "Stick with Alfie, cock, and yer'll do okay. Now I'm gonna catch forty winks of the best. Yer staying awake?"

Nick's eyelids were leaden, but he nodded. "Go on. I'll keep watch."

He heard Alfie clump into the bedroom down the hall. Heard a

drunken mumble and sigh as the big man stretched out. Nick waited ten minutes, then tiptoed down the hall. Alfie was stretched out on the bed, fully clothed, raucous snores issuing from his gaping mouth.

Nick went back into the kitchen and sat down. His head sank toward the table. Surely it would be all right to catch a few minutes sleep himself—later he would go and talk to the girl and try to reassure her. He—

The piercing, terror laden scream screwed deep and painfully into Nick Carter's sleeping mind. He came awake abruptly, instantly clear headed and knowing he had been duped. He ran for the parlor.

The parlor was empty, the door open. He swung around and plunged into the bedroom just as the girl screamed again.

Alfie McTurk was wallowing atop the girl. Her plump white legs were waving wildly in the air as she fought and screamed. A pair of blood stained panties lay on the floor beside the bed. Alfie had his big hands around the girl's throat and he was grunting and groaning in animal passion as he thrust himself into her. She bit him and he cursed and smashed at her face just as Nick reached the bed.

N3 did not stop to think. If he had he would have permitted the rape! The mission came first. Rape was after all only rape—and the lives of millions were at stake! But he did not think. He grabbed Alfie by the collar and dragged him off the girl, who was now strangely quiet. Nick slammed the big man on the jaw with a bony fist, kned him just where his trousers gaped open. Alfie gasped and clutched at himself. He bent over in agony. Nick linked his hands and brought them up under Alfie's chin. The big man went over backward in a flying somersault and lay moaning on the floor.

Nick turned back to the girl. She was lax and still on the bed, the sheet between her white legs stained with blood. Her eyes were closed.

N3 knew then. His heart contracted with rage and a little pity and a great deal of self blame. Goddamn it! She was dead. Alfie had killed her!

Cursing himself and his weakness—for his sleep had really killed the girl—he bent over her and thumbed back one of her eyelids. Dead glass. Brown glass. Nick touched her head gently. It moved like a doll's head, like a broken discarded doll. Alfie had broken her neck!

Nick needed a little time to arrange his face and his wits. He pulled the sheet over the dead girl's body—what a present for her husband when he came home—and slowly turned to face Alfie.

Alfie wasn't there.

Nick went into the kitchen. Alfie was there, sitting at the kitchen table and still clutching at his groin. Alfie was grinning wickedly at Nick. Alfie was pointing a revolver at Nick!

“You ‘urt me bad, you did.” Alfie pointed with the revolver. “Sit down, cock, before this thing goes off on its own. Good thing I found it when I was rummaging around or I’d be in real trouble!” He frowned at Nick. “Lor lum-me, mate! You gorn crazy or something? I was only ‘aving my bit of fun with the missus!”

Nick did not sit down. He already knew what he had to do. He had no alternative now.

“She’s dead,” he said bluntly. “You broke her neck, Alfie! That’s a hanging business, to be sure, and I’m wanting no part of it atall!”

Alfie McTurk’s expression grew both thoughtful and ugly. “Dead, eh? Cor—this changes things a bit, it does. I didn’t mean ter kill her, mate, ‘Struth I didn’t. I was only after me bit of fun like.”

He gestured with the revolver. “Sit down, I said!” His expression was very ugly. Alfie was thinking again.

Nick knew what he was thinking. If he sat down he was finished. Alfie would figure it out in a minute or two. Alfie wasn’t going to leave a witness to murder around.

N3 cut it very fine. Alfie’s finger was tightening on the trigger when Nick kicked the table. He slammed it into Alfie’s chest. The shot went harmlessly into the ceiling. Alfie went over backwards, still holding the revolver.

Nick went over the table in a long diving glide. He picked up the whisky bottle on the way and smashed the top of it on the table edge. Alfie fired again, coming up in a crouch, and the blast seared Nick’s face. He jammed the jagged bottle into Alfie’s face and Alfie screamed and dropped the gun. Blood spurted from his ruined face, drenching Nick.

Nick got Alfie by the hair and pulled his head back and ripped the broken botde across his throat. Alfie was big and tough and slippery and gory. It took Nick longer than usual to get the job done properly, but finally Alfie died and Nick got up and tossed die bloody botde away and stood in the midst of the carnage.

“Goddamn it,” he said aloud to Alfie’s corpse. “Goddamn it to hell—what do I do now? I’ve loused it up good!”

He lit a cigarette, trying not to get blood on it, and noticed that his fingers were trembling. Most unusual for him. He went into the bedroom and stood staring down at the dead girl under the sheet and tried to think.

Suddenly he knew what he could do. Travers had said that Alfie was in trouble with the Druids—they would probably have killed him!

So maybe Alfie’s body would serve as a sort of a passport! It was worth trying. And the plane was on its way!

Nick went back into the kitchen and washed the blood off him at the pump in the sink. When he had finished he looked out the window

and saw that the rain was letting up. Good. Maybe his cross would burn after all.

He went through the cottage, collecting sheets and towels and rags, clothes, anything that would burn. There was a large supply of gasoline for the stove and lamps. When the time came he would make a cross out on the moor and touch it off. He would drag Alfie's body out and have it ready to show the pilot or whoever. Very likely, if it was to be an execution, there would be some of Pendragon's men with the pilot. Centurions.

Nick grinned harshly. He had done their work for them. Maybe they would be thankful enough to take him along with them—perhaps even to Blackscape Island. Or they might shoot him on the spot. He had been with Alfie— and Alfie was a talker!

Nick shrugged. He had done all he could do. He went into the bedroom and stretched out beside the dead girl and went to sleep. He knew he would wake up in time. He always did.

Chapter 10

THE LADY DEMANDS

Eight, o'clock Friday night, November 12, 1965.

Less than nine hours before Pendragon's ultimatum expired!

Nick Carter sat in his tight little high security cell and fumed. Literally. He was smoking the cutty pipe and it stank. They had searched him most thoroughly on arrival at Blackscape Island, but they had concentrated on his clothes and his body crevices. They had missed the plastique in the tobacco pouch and barely glanced at his shoes. N3 was still loaded for bear—the only trouble being that he couldn't reach the bear!

He glanced at the big old fashioned golden turnip of a watch given him by Travers in London—it contained a bug, a beeper, which might be of help in the future. It was none now! It only told him how short the time was before Pendragon's ultimatum expired and the missiles left their pads. Nick stared at the watch and sickness grew in him. Eight hours, fifty six minutes, fourteen seconds!

And here he sat, encased in battleship steel, as helpless as a baby. He might as well have been back in Washington, or at the black house, or on the moor.

Getting to Blackscape had been absurdly easy. Almost too easy! The four-seater plane landed at dusk, guided by the flaming cross. Alfie McTurk's body had served well enough as an introduction and, eventually, as a passport. There had been two Centurions with the pilot—mission to execute Alfie for insubordination. For a few seconds Nick's own life had hung in the balance—they could hardly afford to leave him behind, alive—but in the end he had convinced them. Alfie was dead and they apparently had no orders about Nick. Nick suspected that the Druids, like any large organization, was subject to red tape and snafu. And the Centurions did not kill without direct orders. He was grateful for the fact.

Later, on Blackscape, they had been quite friendly. Impersonal, but friendly. He had been questioned and searched and made to fill out a dozen forms. He might have been applying for a job in the model cannery so busily humming away on the other side of the electrified barbed wire!

They appeared to accept him as genuine. Sean Mitchell, veteran IRA man and hater of the English. Professional dynamiter. He would,

they told him at the end of the processing, be allowed to join the Druids with a probationary status. Later. Everything later! Just now they were very busy with most important matters and all recruiting was being held in abeyance. Meantime he would be placed in temporary quarantine. He would be well fed, allowed exercise, and kept in a snug little steel cell!

It was frustrating. Maddening! To be so near and yet so far. During his exercise periods, tramping the black rock under guard, his keen eyes had sought and found three long fissures, carefully engineered cracks in the volcanic surface of the island. They marked the silos. The huge gates that would swing up and out when the time came. Then the ugly round noses of the missiles, Titan or Adas types— British Intelligence wasn't sure which—would poke up out of the silos and be on their way in a matter of minutes.

Nick glanced at the watch again and cursed softly. He was cutting it very fine. Maybe too fine. Waiting and watching and praying for a break which hadn't come. Which he knew now wasn't going to come! When he was out of the cell he was guarded constantly. When he was locked in the cell he was helpless. Or so they thought!

Nick Carter knew better. He had a way of getting out of the cell. A mere pinch of the plastique would do it!

But once he did that he would be committed! There could be no turning back. He would have to kill—start killing and never stop until he reached the silos and blew up the missiles! And died with them! By this time N3 had little hope of getting off Blackscape alive. It would not be a sacrifice made gladly. N3 was going to begrudge his life! He liked his life. Loved it. Yet if it came to it—he would have to go along with all the other poor devils!

One thing—the cannery was shut down on weekends, except for a skeleton staff, and most of the workers had taken the ferry to the mainland that afternoon. So in the main the immediate casualties would be militant Druids who knew what they were doing. Scientists and technicians.

At a quarter of midnight Nick decided he would have to go. Go for broke! He would have preferred to do it quietly, but that was impossible. He would have to blow the door! That would bring the guards on the run and might even trigger a general alarm system. He must chance that.

He was unscrewing the heel of one shoe, to get a detonator, when he heard the footsteps coming down the long steel corridor. He hastily screwed the heel back on. The footsteps stopped at his door and he heard a jangle of keys. The door opened and a tall, bearded man entered the cell. He wore a clean white coverall—the Druid uniform—with a red dragon emblazoned over the left breast. On his collar a

single silver star glistened. High rank, thought Nick. Behind the tall stranger a single guard lingered in the doorway, his hand resting lightly on a holstered pistol. He wore the chevrons of a sergeant.

The bearded man had a broad Slavic face. He stared hard at Nick for a moment with small blue eyes. "You are Sean Mitchell?"

"I am that. 'Tis himself I am." The role of Mitchell had come to be second nature to N3 by this time.

The bearded man nodded. "You'll come with me. Now." He turned back to the door. The sergeant-guard stood aside to let Nick pass, then locked the door behind him. He followed Nick and the stranger down the long clanging passages.

To Nick's surprise the guard did not follow them out into the windswept night. The heavy steel door of the little prison swung shut behind them. He was alone with the bearded man on the black barren rock, a giant boulder lashed by foaming seas. The wind snatched at him and nearly bowled him over. He clutched at one of the ropes staked into the rock for guidance and support. The stranger was also clutching at the rope. He put his lips close to Nick's ear and yelled above the eerie cry of the wind: "Don't get any ideas. I'm not armed. Just follow me and mind your manners! It's for your own good, Mr. Nicholas Carter!"

So they knew who he was! At least this one did—this one star general in the Druids. Nick followed the man, clinging to the rope, as they made their way across the sleek rock to where lights gleamed in a low building near the cliffs. Nick could hear the crash and boom of the eternal surf above the roaring of the wind. Blackscape was as bleak and desolate as they came—and admirably suited for Pendragon's purpose.

On the far side of the electrified barbed wire that sliced the island in two he could see a few lights in the cannery. It was not working. On his side of the wire were half a dozen low concrete buildings, like overgrown blockhouses. During his exercise periods he had gotten them pretty well sorted out. Administration, living quarters, prison, mess hall, and two operational buildings for the missile complex. He guessed that the entrance to the complex, far below the surface of the rock, would be in one of the latter. Perhaps both. He would find out later. If he made it that far. Right now it looked bad. The man had called him Carter! It would do little good to try and bluff it out now. There was no time! There was time only for action! Should he kill the bearded man now and take his chances? It would be easy enough—he had only to take him from behind with a karate blow.

N3 decided against it. He would play out the hand, wait and see. Besides the man had no weapon—and Nick needed a weapon desperately. He would wait and see what was in store for him.

They were walking halfway across the island. A good half mile. Nick's face was raw from the wind. They passed the building where the lights glowed and dipped into a shallow hollow in the rock. Nick saw the loom of a smaller building against the turgid sky. He had missed this one in his count. It nestled secretly in its little stone valley. It was totally dark.

The bearded man halted. The rope ended at a wide steel door set into the concrete wall. "We're here, Mr. Carter. Perhaps you had better prepare yourself for a surprise." His tone was friendly enough. He spoke English a shade too perfectly and with a very slight accent that Nick guessed was Russian. No doubt one of Pendragon's kidnapped and brainwashed atomic scientists.

The man did not open the door immediately. Instead he stood looking over Nick's shoulder at the dull glint of the island behind them. When he spoke there was something of awe in his voice. "Do you know how much all this has cost, Mr. Carter?"

It seemed an odd question at a time like this. Nick shrugged and said, "Not the faintest idea. Why?"

The stranger chuckled. "It is foolish, perhaps, but I am impressed by money and what it can do. I was a very poor boy in Russia. This cost three billion, Mr. Carter!" He waved a hand around in a three quarters circle. "Three billion dollars! It staggers the mind, does it not?"

N3 could have taken him then, quite easily. Killed him on the spot. The man was off guard— did not seem to think himself in any danger. But again N3 decided against it. It could be a mistake. Something was cooking. Wait and see. But not for long. Time was slipping away. The sand was running out of the glass.

He said: "Three billion is cheap enough for a world."

The man chuckled. "Yes, I suppose so. Well, let us go in and get down to business, Mr. Carter. Your share of that world is waiting."

He inserted a long shiny key into the door and they stepped in out of the cold wind. Stepped into the smell of luxury. Nick could see nothing, but the odor was there. The subtle effluvia of riches, of carpets and hangings and fine furniture and lavish living. It caught him off balance for a moment. Until now everything on Blackscape had been sterile and efficient and utilitarian. He sniffed. Incense.

The one star Druid led him down a narrow corridor to a transverse hall. Here indirect lighting glowed a discreet orange. The carpet was deep beneath their feet. They came to a plain door of polished wood. The Druid tapped softly. From within a woman's voice said, "Come in."

Nick recognized the voice instantly. So she was on the island!

Lady Hardesty was standing in the middle of the luxurious

apartment, sipping from a small glass of wine. The lighting was soft and discreet and Nick thought he had never seen a more beautiful woman, nor a more dangerous one. She smiled at Nick over the wine glass and her teeth glinted like milkstone. "So we meet again, Mr. Carter. I'm glad!"

She laughed and waved him to a low divan with many pillows. "I am also glad I missed that day. Glad I did not kill you! I need you now." N3 sank into the divan. And I need you, he thought, like a hole in the head! But his brain was clicking over. There was no time to be curious, or he might have been. But if she needed him? Wait and see — a little longer. It was punt and pray psychology, and he really couldn't afford it, but he was going to risk it. For a little time.

Lady Hardesty glanced from Nick to the bearded man. "You two have not met formally?"

The Druid was staring at her. Nick understood it then. The guy was hooked! Hooked on Lady Hardesty, hooked on sex as surely as if he had been a main-liner on heroin. Things were beginning to make a little sense.

The bearded man tore his eyes away from her. He nodded at Nick. "I am Serge Konstantinoff, Mr. Carter. I am in command on this island."

N3 inclined his head brusquely. From the corner of his eye he saw Lady Hardesty's smile. She knew who was in command on this island—at least for the moment.

"Serge is my jailer," Lady Hardesty said in a teasing voice. She took the man by the arm and steered him toward the door. Nick noticed how she allowed her nubile body to meld with, to touch that of Konstantinoff. At the door he put an arm around her and pulled her close to him for a moment. She kissed his cheek and pulled his beard. "Go now, darling. Come back in an hour and we may have good news. Be sure to lock the door after you."

Konstantinoff glanced over her shoulder at Nick. He held up the long shiny key. "The only one, Mr. Carter! Bear it in mind. Goodbye, then. I will see you later." He kissed Lady Hardesty lightly on the lips and went out. The door clicked shut and Nick heard the key turn.

Lady Hardesty turned toward him, rubbing her mouth with the back of her hand. An expression of distaste was on her face. "Faugh—he is like a great uncouth bear! Only not so good as a bear— if you know what I mean!" Her moist lips parted in a smile as she came toward Nick. She licked her lips with a small pink tongue. "You now, Nick, are better than any bear. Again, if you know what I mean?"

So the battle was on again, N3 thought. Sex as his only weapon. Well, it was better than nothing. He hoped.

Lady Hardesty slid down beside him. Her cool moist lips caressed

his cheek. "You look a little better than when I last saw you, my dear one. Not that I care how you look— it's your performance I'm interested in and that was magnificent. But all that later— for now we must talk business. I'm going to make you a fine proposition, Nick."

N3 grinned. He decided to go along, play it by ear. He still had a few hours grace.

He said, "It'll cost you, baby. My stud fees come high. Can you afford me?" He moved a bit away from her.

Lady Hardesty was wearing slacks and a silk happicoat with a golden dragon rampant on the back of it. The peaks of her small tight breasts dimpled the sleek fabric and it was obvious she was not wearing a brassiere. Her shiny jet hair was done in a chignon as before, and her complexion had the same creamy pallor, the perfect texture of camelia sans makeup other than lipstick. Her mouth was a blood-colored slash, the prim upper lip, the loose and sensuous lower. As she had on the London Mail, she reminded Nick of a highly lubricous school-teacher.

She put a hand on his thigh and squeezed. "I can afford you. I'm going to offer you half the world, in fact. Or at least my half of half the world. Interested?"

"I'm a realist," said Nick. "Let that do for now." He pulled the big gold watch from his pocket. "In about four hours and a half there won't be much world left! You'd better talk fast, honey. What do you want? What's going on?"

Lady Hardesty got up to fix them drinks. She put cigarettes on an inlaid ivory coffee table before the divan. "There's plenty of time," she said as she sat down again. "You aren't going anywhere, Nick, darling. There is only one door to this apartment and it's lined with steel. There are no windows. The air comes through vents on the roof. They're too small to crawl through." She pointed to the door. "Believe me when I tell you that is the only way out— and Serge has the only key. I should know— I'm a prisoner myself! My husband sent me here for safe keeping until after— after you know what! Then he'll have me killed, of course. He thinks! That's why I want you to kill him first!"

Nick had not touched his drink. He did not intend to touch it. This was a nasty little piece, this Lady Hardesty. It would be like her to dope him to keep him quiet until it was too late. He put the drink on the coffee table. She made no comment, but sipped at her own glass of Tio Pepe and widened her long black eyes at him.

Nick took a cigarette from the onyx box. He had been smoking that damned pipe, and the cigarette tasted good. He lit it with his lighter. They had let him keep that, too. One more shot of napalm in it. He was saving it for the desperation moment.

He put the lighter back in his pocket. "I'll be glad to kill Pendragon

for you,” he said easily. “Where is he? Of course that will have to wait until after I blow up his missiles.”

Lady Hardesty smiled her moist smile. “You aren’t going to blow up the missiles. I want them to go as planned. I want my husband to have to take the blame for that! But as soon as the missiles are launched, at the very moment they leave their pads, I want him killed. Then I’ll take over! I can do it as well as he could. Better. His people, his pawns in the various governments—I can handle them better than he ever could.”

Nick looked her up and down. “I’ll buy that. You’ve got more to handle them with.”

She put her pink tongue out at him in a curiously childish gesture. “Don’t underrate sex, darling. It makes the world go round! And all of Pendragon’s puppets are old men! Mostly impotent, but they still try. I’ve got them wrapped around my finger. They get on their knees and beg for it. Sometimes it’s all I can do to keep from laughing in their faces. They’re so pitiful!”

Nick nodded slowly. “I begin to get it. A sort of palace revolution. You’re going to let Pendragon win the war, as it were, then you’re going to knock him off and take his place. And this Serge— he’s going along with you? You’ve got him hooked, too, and he’s selling out Pendragon. I suppose he’s going to be the number two boy?”

Lady Hardesty shook her head. “No. He’ll be number one, as far as anyone knows. He’ll be a front for me. The world isn’t quite ready yet for a woman leader. I’m smart enough to know that. But Serge will do just as I tell him— he’s mine body and soul. And the fagades, the so called leaders and politicians, they’ll do just as Serge tells them!”

Nick tapped ash from his cigarette. “You still intend to carry out Pendragon’s plan— I mean if you bring it off? You still intend to bomb the Russians?”

“Oh, yes!” Her frown was sincere. “I absolutely believe in that part of his plan. The Russians must be utterly destroyed.”

“Even if it means they’ll retaliate? That most of the world will be blown up? That millions of innocent people wiU die?”

She flicked a cigarette ash from her slacks and crossed the slim long legs. “Darling! What do I care about millions of people? That’s a lot of syrupy nonsense for sentimental slobs!” She leaned to pat his knee. “Anyway we can pick up the pieces. We can put the world back together again— you and I, Nick! All you have to do is say the word, my love.”

“And kill Pendragon,” he murmured.

“Yes. And kill Pendragon! At the proper time— a minute after the missiles go off!”

“All right,” said Nick. “I’ll do it. Now— where is Pendragon?”

Lady Hardesty slid closer to him. Nick put a hand on her slim leg and she shivered. But her dark eyes were wary.

"I want you," she whispered. "I want you terribly. You're the only one— but don't try to trick me, Nick! There are no weapons in the apartment. You can't get out. Serge will kill you at the slightest hint from me. You'd better be on the level with me, darling. Don't make me sorry I didn't kill you!"

Nick stroked her cheek. "I was never more on the level in my life. How did you know I was on the island, anyway?"

She sank against him. He put one muscular arm around her shoulders. She was so frail. He could smash her like an egg shell. And that would ruin everything.

"I watched you on the exercise ground," she told him. "Through field glasses. I watched every day. I had a feeling you would show up here, that you would get through somehow." She was running a hand up and down his heavy thewed leg. "Oh, Nick! If— if you only knew how much I've thought about you! About what you did to me on that train! You're magnificent, Nick. Just magnificent. There is no other word for you. That's why I want you to be with me. Together we'll be unbeatable!"

Nick kissed her ear. "Suppose they all capitulate? Give in. Pendragon won't send the missiles then, of course. You still going to kill him?" Nick knew, because Travers had told him, that the governments involved were going to capitulate unless the missiles were blown up, or they heard from Nick, by five minutes of five that morning! They were cutting it very fine indeed. And there was still the enormous worry about the Russians— if they ever found out what was really going on!

Lady Hardesty's next words chilled Nick to the marrow of his husky bones.

"It won't make any difference," she said with a smile. "I want the missiles to go! You must kill Pendragon a bit earlier if it looks like a capitulation! He mustn't be allowed to stop it. And he wants to stop it — he doesn't really want to use the bombs! But I do! We can make it look as if the Russians did it, and we can retaliate instantly. Just as soon as our, my, men are in power! No— the missiles must go as scheduled! I need the chaos and the havoc and the panic to help me take over!"

N3 fought off the growing chill that pervaded him. He had made a mistake. They had all made a mistake. Pendragon was a megalomaniac, perhaps, but he was also intelligent and had a sense of self preservation. He wouldn't blow up the world unless he absolutely must to gain his ends. But Lady Hardesty wanted to blow it up. This lovely wanton was the real nut! As psycho as they came!

Nick bent to nuzzle one of her breasts. She put her head back, arching the long swan's neck, her eyes closed. "So good," she murmured. "So nice—don't stop."

"I've got to kill Pendragon," Nick whispered against one taut, high peaked breast. "Where is he?"

She told him.

Nick whistled softly. "Clever. Very clever indeed. But London is a long way from here. Hadn't I better get started? It will take a little time to dig him out, you know." He kissed the soft, white blue veined breast again, caressing the cherry tip with his tongue.

Lady Hardesty shuddered and suddenly pushed him away. She buttoned the happicoat and stood up. "Come," she commanded him. "There is something I must show you first. Something you must do—to prove your loyalty to me. After you have done it we will put you on a plane for London and you can kill my husband."

He followed her down a hall, past a large bedroom, to a small room at the very end of the hall. It had a solid metal door. Lady Hardesty clicked a latch and the door swung open. She stepped aside to let Nick enter. "An old friend of yours, I think."

Gwen Leith was spreadeagled on a bed in the center of the room. She was naked. A single harsh bulb in the ceiling revealed every detail of her lush and sturdy body from the big firm breasts to a little triangle of red pubic hair. Her wrists and ankles were spread and fastened to each corner of the bed by looped straps.

As they entered Gwen opened her eyes and stared up at Nick. Her slate blue eyes blinked in astonishment and, for a moment, there was hope in them. Then she saw Lady Hardesty and the hope died. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. She closed her eyes again. She lay naked and silent and helpless.

Lady Hardesty was gazing down at the girl with a cruel little smile on her scarlet mouth. She touched Nick's arm. "She has told us everything she knows, I'm sure. I see no point in prolonging her agony, Nick, dear. Do put her out of her misery, like a good boy! You'll be doing her a favor and at the same time you'll be proving yourself—to me!"

"Sure," said Nick. He stepped toward the bed. "Since we've no weapons around I'll have to strangle her—okay?" He saw Gwen Leith's eyelids twitch. A convulsive shudder ran through the beautiful body. One of her ankles was tightly bandaged, Nick saw, but otherwise there was not a mark on the velvety white flesh.

"No!" said Lady Hardesty. "Don't strangle her. Look." She pointed to a corner of the room. Nick saw two small wooden boxes with chicken wire drop fronts. Something writhed and moved in the boxes. He began to feel a little queasy and steeled himself against it.

Lady Hardesty led him to the corner. One box contained a mass of snakes, coiling and entwined in sinuous unceasing movement. "They're harmless," Lady Hardesty said. "Use that one, Nick. Just carry the box over and open it and drop it on her. Be careful. It's deadly."

The cobra in the box stiffened and began to puff itself up a bit. It reared and hissed at Nick as he came close.

Nick played for time. He must think! "Why all this nonsense?" he demanded. "Why don't I just strangle her and be done with it?"

Something moved in Lady Hardesty's dark eyes and for a moment he was reminded of the cobra. "Because I prefer it this way," she said sweetly. She licked her tongue over her lips. Nick looked at the cobra, saw the fangs flick in and out. Not much to choose between the two of them.

He picked up the box and carried it to the side of the bed. "All right," he said. "Have it your way. Better get over there by the door. We'll be leaving in a hurry!"

Gwen Leith opened her eyes. She stared up at him. Nick had never seen such horror in a human being's eyes. "No!" Gwen whispered. "Please! For the love of God don't! Kill me some other way!"

Nick hesitated. Behind him Lady Hardesty's voice cracked like a whip. "Nick! We're wasting time!" He had to do it fast. Smoothly. There wasn't much chance as it was, but he had to try. He put one big hand around the girl's throat and began to squeeze. "Let me strangle her," he begged Lady Hardesty. "I hate snakes myself."

"Do as you're told, Nick!" Her voice was like a steel rod jammed into his spine.

Nick's searching fingers found the spot he wanted. Just behind Gwen's ear. There was a nerve there, a pressure point. But he must be careful. A little too much pressure and he would kill her!

He squeezed. Felt the flesh slide beneath his fingers, the muscles and bone give and crack a little. There! The girl was unconscious!

Nick lifted the box high and shot open the latch holding the chicken wire front. The cobra dropped with a plop onto the white belly of Gwen Leith.

Nick ran for the door. He grabbed Lady Hardesty and pushed her out ahead of him. "Come on. I'm damned if I'm going to watch it!"

She latched the door. She smiled up at him. "Why," she laughed, "you're nothing but a fraud, Nick Carter! Just a big softy. I'm a little disappointed in you. After all I've heard about you, too! You were supposed to be about the toughest man in the world!"

N3 smiled. A charming smile. An apologetic, little boy with his hand caught in the cookie jar smile. Hawk had once called it his murderous smile! Anyone who really knew him always left him as

soon as he smiled like that.

"I can't stand to kill women," Nick said now. "I never could. It's such a waste, you see."

They were about to pass the bedroom door. He halted and drew her into the bedroom. "I'm all shook up, honey. Best you make me forget a little, huh?"

For a moment she hesitated. She glanced at a little watch on her thin wrist. "We haven't much time, darling. Serge will be back—and you must get on the plane for London. I don't know! Oh, I want to, but —"

"A quickie," Nick whispered. "Just a quickie, honey. A promise of things to come when we can own the world!" He was playing it all the way now. No holds barred. All stops out. She was as mad as a hatter! He had a good chance of getting away with it!

"All right!" Lady Hardesty went into the bedroom, unzipping her slacks at the side as she went. She smiled back at him. "You talked me into it, darling. Only hurry!"

He needed a bottle of whisky. He had no knockout drops and whisky would have to do. With relief he saw a miniature bar in one corner of the bedroom. He started toward it. "Get undressed and in bed," he told her. "I need one drink to get the taste of that cobra out of my mouth. Ugggg, what a way to go!"

When he came back to the bed she was ready for him. Camelia petal flesh spread and anxious. Eager. Small breasts springing alive from her rib cage, awaiting his weight to crush them. Red mouth in vivid yawn of desire. Long dark eyes half closed, watching him avidly as he took off the single white coverall they had given him. Her eyes flickered over his magnificent body and he heard her gasping softly.

"Hurry," she whispered. "Hurry—hurry!"

To Nick she looked like all the crazy whores in the world.

"Coming," he said cheerily. He picked up the whisky bottle. He took a drink. He sank down beside her.

"Kiss me!" she demanded.

"Kiss this!"

He took the white swan throat in one hand and squeezed it until her mouth opened in an attempt to scream. He rammed the neck of the whisky bottle down her throat and held her as the fiery stuff poured down her gullet.

Chapter 11

NO TIME FOR TEARS

Lady Hardesty fought like a demon. He held her as easily as though she were a puppy. He spread a big hand over her face, pinching her nose and holding the snarling red mouth open. He put his solid weight across her slim body.

“Drink!” he told her. “Drink it all, you crazy bitch! Drink the whole quart!”

She gasped and retched and tried to vomit. She fought to bite him. He held her grimly and thrust the bottle neck farther down her throat and poured and poured. At last the bottle was empty. She had a quart of whisky in her!

He knew that if he left her conscious for a moment she would spew it all up. It would take a few minutes for the stuff to knock her out completely. He balled his hand into a fist and tapped the lady on the jaw. Just hard enough to put her away. She relaxed on the pillow, her eyes glassy, her hair in wild disorder, her white limbs still twitching.

Nick took the whisky bottle in one hand, holding it by the neck as a club, and padded naked down the corridor to the room where Gwen Leith was imprisoned. He would know, in just a moment now, whether or not his desperate plan had come off. He had gambled that if she were unconscious, did not move, the cobra would not strike. He had put her out with the jitsu squeeze— if only she had not regained consciousness too soon and moved! And if only the cobra understood the rules—that it was not supposed to strike at something which did not move! So many ifs!

Cautiously he opened the door. Slowly. He peered in.

Gwen Leith was still out cold. The cobra was coiled on her belly!

Goddamn it! If she woke now she would go into hysterics and start thrashing around. That would be the end.

Nick stepped into the room. The cobra immediately raised its flat, triangular head and began to weave back and forth. Cautiously Nick stepped toward the reptile, the bottle thrust out in front of him.

Sssshhhhhhh—shhhhhhhhhhh—

The hissing grew and filled the little room. The cobra watched Nick with cold lidless eyes. Nick went a step closer to the bed. Gwen Leith stirred and moaned.

Damn! It would have to be now! Nick thrust the whisky bottle close to the snake. As close as he dared. Still closer.

The cobra struck. It was lightning uncoiling in deadly reflex. Nick Carter was just half a heartbeat faster. He moved aside, as fluid and fast as his own shadow, and let the snake fall to the bedside. It hit the floor with a solid thud and turned and began to coil again. Nick rushed it. He swung the bottle at the flat head, swung it again and again, hating the snake now, battering its head to a bloody pulp against the floor.

When he was sure the snake was dead he kicked it into a corner. It felt like cold rope against his bare foot. He glanced at the girl, saw that she was breathing normally, stirring and groaning in the artificial sleep into which he had sent her.

Leave her. She would be all right for now. She would only be in the way for what was coming up.

Time was growing so short that he did not like to think about it.

He went back into the bedroom. Lady Hardesty was still sprawled on her back, breathing harshly, steeped in drunken slumber. A worm of amber whisky leaked from the corner of her lax mouth. Her nipples were still rigid and erect.

Rapidly Nick went about setting the stage. He picked up his white coverall and hung it on a chair. He put Lady Hardesty's slacks and panties and the happicoat on the same chair. He checked the tobacco pouch and his lighter.

All in order. His shoes were over near the bar, where he had kicked them off.

N3 went back to the bed and spread out beside the unconscious woman. He was naked. She was naked. That was the way he wanted it. The sight would shock Serge Konstantinoff just enough—just for the second that Nick needed.

The bed, the room, reeked of whisky. Nick closed his eyes and waited. Why didn't the bastard come? He picked up Lady Hardesty's limp wrist and looked at the little gold watch. The hour was up. Serge should be here.

He heard the key in the lock. Nick closed his eyes and feigned sleep. Come on, he thought grimly. Come and get yours, Serge baby! Come and see what your lady looks like now! But look fast. You won't have much time!

He heard the door close. Silence. Pause. Then the soft rumble of the Russian's voice. "Lady Hardesty? Mr. Carter?"

More silence. He could hear the man breathing. The bedroom door was wide open.

"Lady Hardesty? Is anything wrong?"

Footsteps coming down the hall, now approaching the bedroom door.

"Lady Hardesty—" Serge was at the door now, peering in. Nick

heard his sharp intake of breath. Then a muttered Russian curse. The man came into the room. He approached the bed. He was bending over the bed, staring at the two naked bodies in shocked disbelief.

Nick opened one eye. He grinned drunkenly up at the Russian. "Hi, fella! Don't mind us. It just got a lil' drunk out, is all! Take off your clothes and join the party. Ever one welcome, you know. I shorry, but I think the booze all gone. I—"

Serge spat on the carpet. With an expression of enormous revulsion on his bearded face he reached to shake Lady Hardesty's shoulder. "You are pigs, both of you! Lady Hardesty! Wake up!"

Not yet!

Nick giggled at the Russian. "Wha's matter, old man? You didn't know she was a lush and a whore? Well, you know now. You better believe it, brother! You put your money on the wrong mare, fella! You shoulda stuck with ol' Pendragon. I—"

"Quiet!" Serge pushed Nick in the face with a contemptuous hand. "Pig!"

N3 struck with the same deadly efficiency as the cobra. Only he found his mark. Serge's throat beneath the bristling protecting hedge of beard. His fingers curled around the man's thick neck and he pulled him down and across the bed. For a moment they were entwined, as though they were two obscenely perverse lovers. The big Russian kicked and tried to get traction, to get to his feet, to shake off the two steel claws that were throttling him. He gave that up and grabbed Nick's wrists and tried to pull the hands away from his throat. It was like trying to pull the bars out of a modern prison window.

Serge's eyes were wild and pleading now and he tried to gouge Nick's eyes with his fingers and thumbs. Nick butted him hard on the jaw with his head. Serge's tongue was out and his face was turning a purple-blue. He clawed at Nick's eyes. Nick ducked and buried his face in the man's chest, never for an instant relaxing the terrible bulldog grip. Serge's feet and legs began to flail the bed.

When the face over his gripping hands was only a leering ugly mask with dead eyes Nick let go. He let Serge slip to the floor beside the bed. A witness to death, but oblivious to it, Lady Hardesty began to snore harshly.

Nick stood up and flexed his badly cramped hands. Then he knelt and swiftly stripped the dead Russian of his white coverall with the red dragon and the silver star of rank. He donned the coverall. Not a bad fit. A little loose in front because he didn't have the dead man's paunch, but no matter.

He transferred the lighter from the other coverall to his pocket. Also the tobacco pouch and pipe. He put on his shoes and went down the hall again to the little room. It was just after two o'clock in the

morning. A little less than three hours!

Gwen Leith was awake when he pushed open the door. She stared at him and her rather too large for beauty mouth opened in a little scream. "Nick! Oh, God, Nick!"

She was on the verge of raving hysterics and he knew it.

That mustn't happen. He needed her alert and with a whole mind. To keep her on the right side of sanity he began to play the fool. He stood laughing down at her for a moment, then he tickled her smooth pale belly.

"Aha, me proud beauty! I've got you in my power now. You'd never let me touch you before, but now—" He tickled her belly again. She squirmed.

"Nick—stop it! You—you aren't—?"

Nick leered down at her. "Aren't what beautiful?"

Doubt leaked into her wide eyes. "You aren't—with them?" She was taking in the red dragon and the silver star glittering on his collar.

Nick grinned evilly. He began to cast off the straps holding her to the bed. "So now you know! As that commercial has it back in the States—I thought you would never ask! But I'm not with them! I'm with you. With me! We're going to rule the world, baby, so come on out of that bed." He pulled off the last strap. "Hurry before I forget all about the mission and hop in with you!"

Gwen glanced down at her nakedness and a slow stain crept over her freckle starred face. "My God," she gasped. "Get out of here! I'm naked."

Nick pulled her from the bed. "No time for modesty, kid. You want to stay here with that?" He nodded to the corner where the dead cobra lay. The snakes in the other box were hissing and sliding around in a wriggling mass.

Gwen screamed softly. Then loudly. She stared at the snakes with her eyes bugging and her wide mouth open in the scream. She was on the verge again. "Jesus," she said. "Oh Jesus—Jesus—Jesus!"

Nick slapped her across the face. Hard. His hand stained the fair skin. He pointed her toward the door and gave her a push. "Get out! You'll find a coverall in the bedroom. Put it on. Now. Go!"

He smacked her smooth fleshed, resilient fanny and left a handprint there too. "We've got work to do," he told her. "A lot of work. Don't fail me now! Hold out a little longer, until we win this thing, and then you can have the damndest case of hysterics the world ever saw!"

Gwen was too sturdy a girl to wear any of Lady Hardesty's things under the coverall. She would just have to freeze, she said as she stepped into the garment and zipped it up. She had made no comment about Serge's body or the still snoring Lady Hardesty.

Gwen sank into a chair and looked at Nick. "What now? There's very little time."

"You are telling me?" Nick had found a pair of scissors in a drawer and was busy snipping at the beard of Serge. "Rummage about," he told her, "and see if you can find some glue or paste. I've got to grow a beard in a hurry."

A few minutes later she came back with a bottle of ordinary library paste. She nodded toward the woman on the bed. "She keeps a scrapbook, of all things. Pastes clippings in it. There are lots of pictures of her as a movie star and—"

"Who cares!" He snatched the bottle of paste from her and went into the bathroom. "We've all got our vanity, you know. She's got enough for everyone in the world." He began to paste the Russian's beard on his own prominent chin. Into the mirror he said, "You learn anything since you've been here? Anything that will help? Or have they had you tied up in that room all the time?"

"Not all the time. They knocked me out with some sort of dope and flew me straight here from Barrogill Moor. My ankle wasn't broken, as you can see—only badly sprained. They fixed it up for me. They were rather kind, at first. Then she took over!"

Nick was shaping the beard on his chin. It didn't have to be too good a job. Just good enough to fool a guard for a few seconds.

"Then she had them put you to the snake torture—and you talked."

A long silence. He finished pasting on the beard and went back into the bedroom. Gwen was still sitting in the chair, staring at the unconscious Lady Hardesty. "Yes," she said. She did not look at Nick. "I talked. I told them you were heading for London. I—I couldn't take the snake! It got down between my legs and was going to crawl—"

She broke off and put her head in her hands and began to cry.

Nick patted her on the shoulder. "Christ!" he said. "None of that! No time for tears. Don't blame yourself. I don't."

In your place I would have talked too—loud and fast. Now tell me what you've learned about this place."

Gwen straightened in the chair and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry about that. I'm all right now. And I've learned a lot about the setup here, quite a lot. Some I've actually observed, some I have to extrapolate, but I have a special knowledge in this field and I've used my eyes. After they—they tortured me the first time I was sent back to the prison. I was allowed exercise and I saw and understood a lot more than they thought I did. If you can find a paper and pencil I'll make a sketch for you."

Nick went to the desk. Over his shoulder he said, "I thought you were more than just another agent! Travers never let on, though."

“Yes. I hold the rank of Colonel in M5A—that’s a special branch of the Special Branch. The A is for atomic. I’m an expert in counter-defense for missiles. That’s why I was assigned to you—if we did make it to Blackscape they thought I might be of some use.”

Nick handed her paper and pencil and grinned. “Okay, Colonel. Be of some use now. And make it snappy. You draw and talk and I’ll keep busy.” He went to a closet and began searching it. They both needed outer garments of some sort—not only for protection from the cold and wind, but for purposes of disguise.

“I’ve toured some of your missile sites in the States,” Gwen was saying, “and these are very like. Pendragon is using obsolete missiles, really. I’d guess they’re your Titan I, or close to it. He has three of them left—three silos. The hatches open up and out, like gates, instead of sliding aside as the more recent ones do.”

“I saw the slits in the concrete,” said Nick. He found a couple of parkas and tossed them into the room with a grunt of satisfaction. “There. We won’t freeze and the hoods will mask our faces pretty effectively. Go on, baby. How deep is the complex—and most important of all—how do we get into it?”

She was spread out on the floor, not far from the dead Russian, drawing on a piece of paper. “I’d guess the silos themselves go down about 160 feet. Maybe deeper. The control and communications center will be in a separate chamber, probably ball-shaped, and will be about halfway down and connected to the silos by a passage. There will be an escape hatch somewhere, in case of fire or explosion.”

His smile was grim as he squatted beside her to look at the sketch. “There’s going to be fire and explosion, all right. If we can make it down there! But tell me about the escape hatch—it interests me greatly. Does it go up or down?”

“Probably up. They’ll have steel doors which can be sealed hermetically, and they’ll have blast walls and baffles. I see what you’re getting at Nick but I’m afraid the escape hatch is designed the wrong way for us.”

“Yes. We won’t be coming back up! There will be nothing to come up for, or to. Except bullets. If anyone is alive up here then.”

He glanced toward the supine and naked figure of Lady Hardesty, still snoring on the bed. He went to throw a sheet over her. “I’m playing a crazy hunch,” he told Gwen. “This is an island, after all. A rocky island and there must be a lot of caves in those cliffs. I’m betting there is another escape hatch, probably for big shots only, that leads down and out to the ocean somewhere.”

“Let us pray,” said Gwen. She smiled at him. She was quite recovered now.

Nick was still holding the long scissors. He glanced at them, and

then at Lady Hardesty. "If she could talk I'd make her tell us," he said regretfully. "But I'm afraid I overdid the booze a little bit. But we'll see. Go on."

He had found a roll of adhesive tape in the bathroom and now he began to wrap the base of the scissors to make a handle, a hilt. It wasn't Hugo, his favorite stiletto, but it would have to do. Really not bad. The shears were long and thin and very sharp.

"There is probably a crew of six to eight men always on duty in the complex," Gwen said. "I watched them changing guard one day and I'd guess at eight."

"Any idea where they'll be? I mean will they all be in the control center, or scattered around?"

She creased her white forehead in a frown. "With a shot so imminent they'll probably be scattered around—say two officers in the control center, especially if they have closed circuit TV, and two men with each of the birds. They'll be making final adjustments."

Nick was testing his improvised dagger. The ball of tape made an adequate hilt. The crude weapon lacked the balance of his stiletto and would be no good for throwing.

He knelt beside Gwen to study the sketch again. He traced it with a finger.

"All the silos are connected? That means we can't seal off any of the men, the Druids working down there! We'll have to fight them all!"

She nodded. "I know. The passages can be sealed off, but that would prevent the first explosion from triggering the other missiles." Her wide mouth was touched with grim understanding. "I take it that we'll only have time to blow one bird before—before something happens to us."

Nick stood up. He lit one of Lady Hardesty's cigarettes and stood staring down at the sketch, smoke leaking from his nostrils.

"You're so right," he said finally. "We'll probably have time to blow one missile—period! At least it's all we can count on. We'll just have to fight them all! I'll handle that end. Now—are you sure that one missile blown will ignite the other two, blow them also?"

Gwen frowned. "I can't be sure. No one could. But they should go—if the connecting passages are left open."

Nick said: "Okay. We'll count on that. Now we come to the dirty part—those missiles will be armed, right? With fifty megaton warheads?"

She shook her head. He could see doubt and fear in the slate-blue eyes. "That's what we can't really know until it happens," she said softly. "The birds will be all ready for launching, naturally. That means the hydrogen warhead will be in place! But this type of missile

is built to arm the warhead after the launch! An automatic device does that. But maybe Pendragon's scientists have altered that, modified it. There is no way of knowing, Nick."

Nick Carter whistled softly. "Talk about Russian roulette! If they are armed and they blow that will release—" He stopped abruptly.

Gwen picked it up. "You might as well finish it, Nick.

Face it. That will release 150 megatons! Everything in a radius of a hundred miles will go."

He stared at her grimly. "You mean circumference?"

Gwen's smile was sad and stricken. "No. I mean radius." Then, strangely lapsing into her Scots for the moment, she added, "That means the bairns will die, Nick! Thousands of poor innocent babies!"

Nick extended a hand and pulled her from the floor. "All right," he said harshly. "Let's go! Remember that you are to obey orders strictly and to the letter. If you get caught or shot or hurt I won't be able to stop and help you. You'll be on your own. That understood?"

"That is understood." She was very grave now. She took a step closer to him. "Nick?"

"What?" He was in the act of pulling on a parka. He kicked the other one toward her. "Put that on."

She ignored the parka. "Nick—I want you to kiss me! If those missiles are armed and if the blast is enough to trigger them—well, there will never be another chance!"

He swept her into his arms. Her lips were soft and sweet and very, very cold. Even then he could not resist twitting her a bit. "I thought you didn't like me to touch you? You were huffy enough about it before."

Gwen didn't look at him. "I—I'll tell you about that. If we get out of this."

Nick grinned at her. "You do that. Now, Colonel, let's get on with it! I enjoyed kissing you. There is nothing I would like better than to stay here and see what it leads to—but unfortunately there is a little matter that takes precedence. Three birds to blow up. So, in the slang of my native country, leave us get with it!"

He handed her the cigarette lighter and told her what she must do. Her pallor increased but she merely nodded. Nick put the taped shears in the pocket of his parka, along with the big gold watch Travers had given him.

They went to the front door and Nick unlocked it with the key taken from Konstantinoff's body. He left the key in the lock.

At the last moment he saw that Gwen Leith was trembling. She clung to him. "I'm afraid," she whimpered. "Terrified! Oh, Nick, how can we do it? How can we hope to get away with it—just two of us! Oh, God! I'm so afraid!"

Nick Carter pushed her gently out the door into the orange tinted corridor. “The French have a word for it,” he said gently. “Two words. Toujours de l’audace! In plain English—guts! Always guts! Come on, baby. Let’s go feed the birds a little plastique!”

Chapter 12

UNDERKILL

It was pitch dark. The stars had vanished and it had begun to rain, coming in fitful squalls, the heavy drops driven like bullets by the fury of the wind. They trudged with heads down toward the low concrete building housing the entrance to the missile complex. Nick had memorized the sketch Gwen had made. If she was anywhere close to the facts they shouldn't have much trouble getting around—if they got past the first guards!

The guards always went in twos. They carried tommy guns. Nick could imagine they had orders to shoot first and inquire later. To kill at the first hint of anything wrong!

Yet they had to get past them! Nick was counting heavily on the parkas for that. They were both wearing the hoods, with the drawstrings pulling them tightly about their faces —on a night such as this it would appear natural enough. Nick was hoping that he would be mistaken for the Russian and Gwen for Lady Hardesty. His beard showed just enough through the hood. He had taken the silver star from Serge's coverall and pinned it to the collar of the parka. For what psychological value it might have. The Druids were a quasi-military organization and well trained.

They were close to the building now. Nick's hand closed on the taped shears in his pocket. But he could only handle one man. It was up to Gwen to take the other one. If only her nerve didn't break! She had been through a lot.

They were outside the heavy steel doors now. "This is it," Nick whispered. "You okay?"

Her answer seemed to come from far away, a thin echoing whisper. "Yes. I'm all right."

"Come on."

He pushed open the doors and they went into a brilliantly lighted foyer. It was white tiled and barren. A desk in one corner. Behind the desk was a Druid in the white coverall uniform, wearing the two chevrons of a corporal. Near him lounged another guard, a tommy gun slung from his shoulder by a web belt. There was another tommy gun on the desk.

Nick muttered a phrase in Russian, to build the illusion. He whispered. "You take the one at the desk!"

She nodded, her face concealed by the parka hood.

The man behind the desk shoved a large ledger toward them. "Good morning, sir. You'll want to sign in?"

"Da," said Nick. He moved toward the desk, sidling a bit to the side as Gwen came level with him. He turned to face the guard who was standing. "A bad night, eh? Nasty out there." The guard was wearing a heavy parka and Nick knew it would have to be the throat for a quick kill! The man was wearing too many clothes for his makeshift dagger.

"Sure is," agreed the man. "Nasty. I—" Nick moved like a tiger closing in for the kill. The guard's eyes widened and he tried to bring up the tommy gun. Nick heard the snick of the lighter just as the shears came out of his pocket. The man behind the desk screamed in mortal agony.

N3 batted down the tommy gun with one fist. He closed on the guard, bulling in with his weight, and put the shears hard and deep into the man's throat. Blood spurted. The man's eyes goggled and he dropped the tommy gun and tried to pull the steel from his flesh. Nick pulled the shears over and across, using his great strength. There was no cutting edge on the shears, but the man's throat ripped like tissue paper. Nick grabbed the tommy gun and pushed the dying man away from him in the same motion. He whirled.

The little foyer was filled with smoke and the smell of roasted flesh. Gwen was leaning against the desk, retching. The Druid lay behind the desk, his face a burnt charcoal mask of agony. The lighter lay on the floor.

Nick pushed Gwen roughly toward the rear of the foyer. "Get going!"

She nodded, turned and ran. Nick started after her, then saw a movement from the corner of his eye. The napalm blistered guard was moving, threshing about in his death agony, but with purpose in his movement. Nick ran back, the shears ready, but he was too late. Just as he reached the man he saw it—the metal button, like a starter button on a car, set into the floor beside the desk. The man's hand came down on it.

Somewhere in the building a gong began to clang. Nick cursed and turned and ran after Gwen, checking the tommy gun over as he went. The alarm was out. Now everything depended on speed!

Gwen was waiting for him at a door which led to a spiral iron staircase screwing down into the solid rock. Nick pounded past her. "Come on, damn it!" His feet rang on the iron treads.

They reached a short transverse corridor carved out of the living stone. At the far end a massive steel door was beginning to close. It was moving slowly but inexorably. Nick ran for it, only one thought in his mind. To get through before it closed! If Gwen made it, fine. If not

—

He flung himself at the shrinking aperture. The tommy gun caught and held him. He turned sideways and freed the gun and squeezed through. The door moved in. Gwen was still on the other side. Six inches. He seized her by the front of the parka and pulled her through the opening by main strength. The door shut with a hollow little sound.

Nick had meant to blow the door mechanism, to freeze the door, but there was no time now. He had to get to the duty crew before all the passages were sealed off.

More iron stairs led downward. They went pounding down them. Still no sign of the crew. No sign of anyone. Nick was puzzled. They went down four levels and reached another transverse corridor. To their left a passage sloped away at a gentle upward slant. Lights were burning at the end of it. To their right was the launch tube. The missile stood there, its red painted sides cold and glistening with moisture.

Nick hesitated, his eyes on the tall rocket. Gwen was panting at his side. "I don't understand this," he grated. "Where are they? We should have run into trouble before now!"

Gwen pointed suddenly. "Nick! A man—back there in the passage. Come on!" She began to run down the transverse passage. "I think I know—when they heard the alarm they all headed for the escape hatch! One man stays behind to set an automatic closing device. Hurry or he'll seal off everything!"

Nick pounded past her. He thought gingerly of the detonators in his heel and hoped all this running wouldn't jar one of them into explosion. Not until the job was done! He couldn't afford to die yet!

They reached a turn in the corridor. At the far end a white clad figure was fumbling in a large metal box set on the wall. Beyond him an iron ladder led up into a square hole in the ceiling of the passage.

Nick yelled at the man. "Hold it! Hands up. Don't move!"

The Druid in the white coveralls shot a frightened look at them. Then he broke for the iron ladder. Nick loosed one short burst from the tommy gun. The man fell, sliding along the stone floor, his hands just reaching the foot of the ladder.

Gwen passed Nick, running hard for the metal box on the wall. She reached it, pulled open the glass lid, and began flipping switches. Nick watched with a terrible impatience. After a moment she turned to face him. "It's all right. I stopped it. The passages into the other silos are still open."

"That means the main door, the big steel job, that can be opened again too?"

She nodded. "Yes. They'll be down after us as soon as they know

what's happened—that there wasn't a fire or an explosion.”

He pointed to the metal box. “You can't gimmick it from here—so that door won't open?”

“No. Not from this box.”

“Come on.” He turned and ran back the way they had come. At the intersection of the corridors he flipped his hand to the right, toward the brilliantly lighted control chamber. “Go in there and wait for me!” He tossed the tommy gun to her. “Know how to use this?” She nodded that she did.

“Good. If any of them are still hanging around—use it!”

“They won't be. Only one man stays behind to set the automatic.”

Nick did not hear her. He was pounding back the way he had come. That main door had to be sealed. Then they could work alone, at their leisure. They could help build their own tomb.

He was grateful now for the flawless condition of his lungs and his muscles. He ran headlong up the iron stairs, racing against time. When they saw the bodies of the guards they would know, and they would come with tommy guns and grenades and flame throwers. That door had to be jammed!

He reached the great door. Two of them really, each weighing about fifteen tons. They were still closed. He searched the wall and found a huge wheel with a handle on it. Manual control. It would take hours to wind the doors open that way, but it was a safety measure. No good to him now.

Beneath the wheel was a small switch box. He jerked it open. There was a red button and a black button. He pressed the red button. The doors began to slide open. He pressed the black button. The doors halted, then began to close again. Good. He had it now. Blow this box and the doors should be jammed!

Nick twisted off both heels. He fumbled in the tobacco pouch and took out a narrow strip of plastique, handling it gingerly. His instructors had assured him that the stuff would not blow unless properly detonated. One instructor had made a ball of the plastique and bounced it on the floor to make his point. Nick grinned now at the memory and was still most careful.

He plastered a ball of the stuff into the little switch box, cut a short length of wire from the coil taken from his heel and affixed a detonator. He twisted the timer and set it. He looked the whole setup over carefully, then he ran. He was at the third level, going down fast, when he heard the explosion. They were now sealed in, he and Gwen.

They could get on with their work in peace. And find out if his hunch was correct or not—if there was another escape hatch?

Gwen was waiting for him in the glaring light of the control chamber. She looked haggard and utterly weary. The shadows beneath

her eyes were black. The tommy gun sagged in her hands.

Nick took the tommy gun from her. He patted her shoulder and smiled a hard smile. "Remember the old story about the man who locked himself in every night with a hundred locks? He had them everywhere—locks and bolts and chains!"

She tried to smile. "No. I don't know it. But is this any time—"

"There's plenty of time now. That's the point. Anyway one night after he had locked himself in as usual, and was about to go to bed, he heard someone laughing! And he was puzzled and said to himself, 'How can that be? I'm all locked in.' And then the voice laughed horribly and hollowly and said, 'That's right, Buster! We're all locked in— together.'"

Gwen did not laugh. Nick saw that something was wrong, dreadfully wrong. He asked sharply, "What is it?"

"Come here. I've been looking at this control panel. Something is wrong. The launch button is a dummy—a fake. It's not hooked up!"

"What in hell are you talking about?"

He followed her to a huge console where instruments and graphs gleamed. There was a row of buttons on the flat, desk-like surface of the console. Nick stared at the rows of shining dials with a sinking sensation. What in hell had gone wrong now?

Gwen was holding up two loose wires. Her fingers traced an intricate pattern of transistors and condensers and printed circuits set flush into the desk of the console. She turned to Nick, her face like death! "It's a remote control unit—wireless impulse! Pendragon is going to launch the missile!"

Of course! Fool—fool! Nick cursed himself bitterly even as he turned and ran for the launch tube. Pendragon himself would press the button! Who else! From his secure hiding place in London he was watching and waiting! When Big Ben had tolled five the button would be pushed—unless he was forewarned! And he would be! Up there, on top level, they would be getting in touch with Pendragon now, probably by short wave, telling him what was happening. Pendragon would not wait until five o'clock! Pendragon would not wait a minute—once he understood. The bird might fly any second now!

Gwen Leith understood as well as he. They did not need many words. They reached the bottom level and ran into the base area of the launch tube. The monster stood waiting patiently, cold and gleaming and feral, surrounded by a dozen umbilical cords which had nourished it. A tower gantry had been moved away. Nick gazed up at the frosted giant's phallus, blood red in the harsh light, and for a moment his breath came hard. Fear slowed his lungs. The Thing brooded. Waited for Pendragon to press a tiny button and release mass murder.

He shook away the cold hand. They weren't licked yet! Weren't dead yet!

Gwen was unscrewing a plate at the base of the missile. Nick took plastique from the tobacco pouch, all he had, and kneaded it into a flat oblong shape. "This is the abort chamber," Gwen gasped. "Our best chance of blowing it completely! Normally this mechanism is used to destroy the rocket if it gets off course—it ensures complete destruction!"

She was on the last screw. She gave Nick a sad and brave little smile. Gallantry in the face of death, he thought. He was pretty sure, now, that it was going to be death!

"Too bad," Gwen said in a cramped little voice, "that we didn't know the proper wave length—we could have triggered this by wireless and saved ourselves all this work!"

The plate fell to the concrete with a little clang. Nick shoved her roughly aside. "I'm going to set the timer for fifteen minutes. I'll risk that much! See if you can find a way out of here. If you can't we've had it. We'll go with it."

He knelt beside the abort chamber and started to apply the plastique. He was vaguely pleased to find that his hands were rock steady.

It took him four minutes to plastique the abort chamber to his liking, and to cut the wire and set the detonator and timer. He set the latter and wound it and listened for a moment to the barely audible ticking. Fifteen minutes from Hell!

He stood up. No sign of the girl. He called. "Gwen?"

"Over here. I may have found something! Hurry!"

He circled the base of the missile, carefully stepping over hoses and wires intertwined like the snakes in Lady Hardesty's apartment. Gwen was stooping before a small black hole set into the curving wall of the launch tube. Hope flickered in Nick.

"An escape hatch?"

She shook her head and frowned at him. "I don't know—I don't really think so. I think it's an air duct. If it is it won't lead anyplace but into an air blower machine—and there will be a valve somewhere in there! They close all the valves just before a launch!"

N3 stared at the black round opening. It was about the size of a main sewer pipe. "If the valve is closed we've had it? No way past it?"

Gwen shook her head. "No. And the same if we run into the blowing machinery—anyway the—the fire will come right up the pipe!"

"It's hot much," he admitted grimly, "but it's all we've got. In with you. Now! I'll come along. Go on, girl! And if you remember any prayers you might use them!"

She tossed away the parka and wriggled head first into the pipe. He watched her solid little fanny disappear, then took off his own parka. He didn't think he could make it. His shoulders were much too wide—he saw the can of grease then and began throwing off all his clothes except his shorts. He kept the big gold watch, tucking it into his underpants. He smeared the grease on him, from neck to ankles, half an inch thick. He reeked with the stuff. But when he poked his head and shoulders into the tube he could move. Barely move with a terrific effort, but he was slithering inch by inch away from the monster.

The pipe curved. It was blank dark. He called out and heard his voice echo in the squeezing, trap-like confines.

Suddenly he could make out Gwen's voice calling back to him, muffled and strange.

"There's no valve, Nick! I think we're all right—this must be an escape hatch! I'm going down now— steep down toward the sea. I think I can hear surf."

"Shut up and keep going," he called back. "That timer isn't taking any time out!"

When he rounded another bend, leaving behind both flesh and grease, he could see her. It was lighter in the pipe. She called again. "Nick! It runs into a tunnel! Nick, oh Nick, we're going to make it!"

N3 grunted and kept wriggling like a serpent. She was forgetting one little thing—the flame back there, waiting to surge through the pipe.

Then he was through the pipe and dropping into a narrow tunnel in the rock. It was high enough to stand up. Gwen was already running toward a square of light at the far end. Nick went after her. Suddenly she stopped, turned toward him as he came pounding up. "Nick! Th— there's someone else in here! A woman, I think! I saw her just now. She came in from another tunnel!"

Lady Hardesty! Hand it to her! Somehow she had gotten on her feet, fought off the whisky fog and found out what had happened, and had known another way out. Here she was.

Whanggggggg— spanggggggg— whiiiiingggggg—

And she had a gun! Lead spattered and sang off the tunnel walls. Nick grabbed Gwen aild put her behind him. "Come on," he yelled. "If she gets me you get her and keep on going!"

He charged down the tunnel like an enraged bull. She couldn't have more than four or five rounds left and in her condition she wouldn't be very steady. In any case there was nothing else to do but charge into the hail of lead. Better than the flame that must come any second now— the flame and the killing smoke. And, a deadly perhaps and maybe, 150 megatons of hydrogen death! If the explosion was hot

enough to trigger the bombs! By comparison it was like charging a pea-shooter!

The tunnel opened suddenly into a large cavern. A single large bulb cast a sickly yellow glow from the ceiling. The big shots had planned their escape hatch well. Nick had only time to see the cavern mouth, water surging in, a small pier and a motor cruiser—

Whinggggggggg—

A slug slashed off the wall and sang around his head like an angry lead bee. Lady Hardesty was behind a pile of stones near the entrance, sighting at him with a heavy Colt. Nick charged her. “Stay back,” she yelled to Gwen.

The next bullet got him. High in the shoulder. The heavy slug battered him around. He staggered and fell, saw Gwen Leith leaping past him with a snarl on her face. There was no pain. Nick started to get up and go in and finish it, then he relaxed and watched. If Gwen could handle it let her!

Lady Hardesty came to meet the girl, a scream of rage on her red lips, her pallid face etched by fear and anger and desperation. They met and fell, tangling and straining on the sandy floor. Red head and dark head, spitting and clawing and scratching and gouging! They rolled over and over, legs twined and faces together as though they were mad demon lovers instead of mortal enemies.

Nick lay watching dispassionately. He was tired, for him. A strange calm was upon him. It was pleasant to watch someone else struggle for a change.

He roused himself with a sigh. Lady Hardesty was winning. She was astride Gwen, her clothes ripped away, her little breasts hanging bare, and she was strangling Gwen. She looked like a lovely and very evil witch in her moment of sadistic triumph.

Nick found a hand-sized rock with a sharp edge. He did not bother to rise, but crawled to them. He placed the rock in one of Gwen’s convulsive hands. Nick crawled back a few paces.

Gwen struck upward with the sharp rock. Blood gushed down over Lady Hardesty’s face, a scarlet mask hiding both evil and beauty. Gwen struck again and again with the rock. Lady Hardesty fell sideways. Gwen rolled up and over on the now unconscious woman. Gwen raised the rock and Nick did not like the expression on her face. A berserk woman is not pretty! Gwen struck down and again and down and again—

Nick pulled her off the dead lady Hardesty. “That’s enough,” he snapped. “She’s dead!”

Gwen dropped the rock and stared at the body. She turned to Nick, a blank and crazy stare in her blue slate eyes. “I—” she gasped. “I— I—”

It came then. The world rocked. Nick seized the girl and dove for the little pier, sheltering in the cold water beneath it.

The cavern began to tremble. The sandy floor rocked and danced. A great chunk of the stone ceiling came down and splattered and hurled rocks like shrapnel. A great and growing roar filled the cavern. Another huge slice of ceiling came down and buried Lady Hardesty's body. The rumbling sound grew in volume, a million giants gone mad in the bowels of the earth. The planet tilted and blast surged through the cavern like winds unleashed from the Pit.

Gwen huddled close to Nick, her face buried in his grease smeared chest. "Oh God," she cried. "God—god—god—god—"

Then it was over and they were still alive. Nick accepted the miracle without question, which was his way. Smoke began to filter into the cavern from the tunnel. He slapped the girl on the shoulder. "Let's get out of here. In the boat!"

Ten minutes later they were a mile off shore, looking back at the island. The black amorphous smoke was darker than the sky.

"No mushroom," said N3 laconically. "I guess we did it —underkill instead of overkill! Most of the island went, but the bombs didn't. Lucky."

Gwen Leith said nothing. She was staring at him. With an odd note in her voice she said: "If you could see how utterly ridiculous you look! In only your underwear with all that grease on you! And that ridiculous silly beard from a dead man! Oh, Nick, you're priceless!"

"So are you," said Nick. He sighed and took the big gold watch from his shorts. He opened the hunter case and turned a tiny lever. He held up the watch for her to see. "This is a bug, got a beeper in it. A British sub has been lying quietly on the bottom around here for days now— waiting for us. On the slim chance. I've started the beam.

They'll pick it up in a few minutes and come to find us. Get it over with before then, will you?"

"Get what over?"

"Your hysterics, girl! You're heading into them now."

She was and she did. Nick watched patiently as she had the goddamdest case of hysterics he had ever seen. She screamed and cried and moaned. She writhed. But by the time the sub surfaced near them, a black whaleback steaming water and foam, she was over them.

"You're a very understanding man," she told him. She wiped her eyes. "Thank God it's all over."

"For you," Nick Carter said softly. "For you, Gwen. Not for me. There is still a little unfinished business!"

Chapter 13

LAIR OF PENDRAGON

Ian Travers had been furious. Livid! First he had cajoled and then he had threatened and in the end he had called Hawk. N3 sat in Travers' Scotland Yard office and listened on an extension. Hawk had been succinct. Disaster no longer threatened and once again the cousins could quibble.

"He's done your job for you," Hawk had said tartly. Nick grinned. The boss standing up for his number one boy. "So let him finish it his own way!"

Travers stuffed his pipe and fumed. "I want to hang the bastard, Nick! You wouldn't cheat me, would you?"

"Maybe I would," said Nick. He left then, his left arm neady done in a black nylon sling, and in half an hour had deftly and professionally lost the tail Travers put on him.

He hired a red two seater from Rootes and headed out the Chelsea Embankment. At Albert Bridge he turned left, heading for Richmond and beyond.

Pendragon, Cecil Graves Lord Hardesty, was hiding on the old Magna Films lot. He owned it. They had not, according to Lady Hardesty, made a film there in more than five years—when the pressure of Druidism began to impinge more and more on the Laird's time. The movie lot had shut down in the middle of a picture about King Arthur.

Lady Hardesty had explained briefly in the apartment on Blackscape. Very briefly. She had been impatient to get to bed. Nick recalled her words as he steered the little car through Richmond's traffic.

"My husband is as crazy as a coot," she had said. "He really thinks he is a sort of King Arthur! That's where the name comes from, you know. Pendragon. The old Celtic chiefs were called that. Pen means chief in old Celtic, and the dragon refers to their war banners! They were absolute rulers. Dictators. And my husband wants to be one, too. Only he doesn't put it that way—he's weak in a lot of ways! He says he'll be a good dictator, a benevolent despot!" And her red mouth had twisted in a grimace of contempt.

Nick Carter was thoughtful as he left Richmond. He knew enough history to know that Uther Pendragon had been the father of the real King Arthur. Not the Celtic legend. Lord Hardesty had patterned his

behavior after a good man and a fine king—and far out of his time! Nick sighed. It was the money, of course. If Cecil Graves Hardesty weren't the richest man in the world none of this would have happened! He could have doddered his life away harmlessly in some institution for the mildly insane. But the money. The billions! They had taken over!

Twilight was fading when he reached the high fenced in movie lot. It had cleared and the sky was red in the west. It was warmer. The lot stood on the outskirts of a small village, bleak and deserted. Nick parked the two seater in a little copse and walked around the fenced area. There might be a watchman on duty. He must avoid the main gate.

He had brought along a rope and grapnel and it was the work of a minute to get over the tall board fence. He dropped into the lot and stood looking about. Dusk was thickening but it was still possible to make out objects close at hand.

He was in the street of an old Western town. He moved noiselessly down the deserted set, past the false fronts, the saloon called the Gilt Garter. A smithy. A general store. All false fronted, with nothing behind them. Nick allowed himself a faint smile. Like a lot of people he knew.

He stepped over an imaginary line and was in another country. Africa. The Casbah. Narrow cobbled streets. A minaret. The stalls of street merchants.

Still no sign of the watchman, if there was one. He skirted a Foreign Legion fort, forlorn in a desert of trucked in sand, and saw the gleam of light high in a tower. There it was. Camelot! And perhaps Pendragon would be waiting, brooding at the round table, grieving over forlorn hopes. Planning his revenge. Nick wondered if Pendragon knew who had defeated him? Probably he did. The man might be a little mad, but he was no fool. He might be expecting Nick.

Travers had returned his weapons and N3 checked them now. The Luger again in a holster in his belt—Hawk had flown one over—and the stiletto in the chamois sheath on his right forearm. Nick frowned. The slug from Lady Hardesty's pistol had missed the bone but had gouged a lot of flesh out of his left shoulder. It was stiff and sore as hell, hampering his draw. He took the Luger from the holster and put it in the sling. That was better. He flicked the little stiletto into his hand once or twice, then replaced it and headed for Camelot.

King Arthur's castle was not a phony. Lord Hardesty had built it solidly, of real stone, aiming at authenticity. He had produced and directed the picture himself until it had been forsaken.

Nick crossed a lowered drawbridge. The moat below him was half full. Real water. Everything real, he thought with a dry chuckle—even

death!

He gained an inner courtyard and ascended a long ramp to the battlements. Turrets and towers and castellated walls. The light still gleamed in the tallest of the towers, the one dominating the rest of the castle. A little breeze had come up and suddenly Nick heard the snap and rustle of silk or nylon. A long pennant was fluttering on a staff near him. He risked a single look with his pen light, saw the golden dragon dancing in the wind. Nick grinned sourly. The guy had practically advertised his presence here, yet neither Travers nor Scotland Yard nor the local police had tumbled to it. The old purloined letter bit. Hide something under then very noses and they'll never see it!

He entered the tallest tower by an arched door. He climbed a winding flight of stone stairs. He stood at last looking into a large circular room. In the exact center of the room was a round table, gleaming in the light of single powerful bulb over it. A man in a wheelchair sat at the table. His hair was long and white as snow. Behind the man Nick saw a large green radio console. It would contain both transmitter and receiver. A row of shiny buttons glinted on the table at which the man in the wheelchair brooded.

Without looking up the man spoke. "Come in, Mr. Carter. I have been expecting you."

N3's ultra-sensitive ears and eyes had been busy on the way into the castle. He knew there was no danger behind him. Possibly before him, but the extent of that danger he did not know.

He stepped into the room, took a few paces toward the table and halted. He glanced up. Nothing hanging over his head. His eyes ran around the room like ferrets.

Cecil Graves Lord Hardesty smiled faintly. "No tricks," he said. "No suspended battle axes, no trapdoors. I promise. You have won, Mr. Carter. I admit it. I hoped you would come—I badly wanted to see the man who could defeat me single handed."

"I had help," Nick told him. "Lots of it. But you damned near got away with it."

Pendragon held up a slim, artistic looking hand. "You are too modest, sir. But I presume you didn't come to exchange compliments?" He had a long, clean shaven face and his eyes were gleaming gold in the harsh light. He sat upright in the wheelchair, a shawl or light rug thrown over his knees. Now he ran a hand through his long white hair. "Just why did you come, Mr. Carter? To gloat over me?"

Nick shook his head. "I never gloat, Lord Hardesty. I came to finish the job—I'm going to hand you over to the police." He had only that moment decided. Give Ian Travers his little present.

The man in the wheelchair shook his white mop of hair. "I wouldn't like that, Mr. Carter. And do me the kindness, please, to address me as Pendragon while you're here. A queer fancy of mine, I know, but I have tried to live as Pendragon and I should like to die as he. So if you will humor me?"

N3 nodded curtly. "Okay. Shall we go, Pendragon?"

The man in the wheelchair raised a hand. "No. I think not. I do not relish being made a laughing stock. I do not want to sit in a court and hear myself sentenced to hang!" The long smooth face crinkled in distaste. "A most undignified death. I will not abide it!"

Nick stepped closer to the round table. "Maybe they won't hang you."

The queer golden eyes gleamed at him. "No. Perhaps. But life in a prison for the criminally insane is even worse than hanging. No, Mr. Carter! You have brought about my downfall and now I think you owe me something!"

Nick Carter was very seldom taken off balance. Now, for a moment, he was. "I owe you something?"

Pendragon smiled. His false teeth were of excellent workmanship. "Yes," he said. "You owe me my death, I believe. I want you to kill me now! Here and now, sir! Or, better yet, allow me to kill myself!"

He raised his arms. "I have no weapon, you see. I am dependent on you. Please, Mr. Carter. I beg of you. Give me a gun—I'm sure you have one—give me a gun with a single bullet. I'll do the rest. Let me depart this life with at least a modicum of dignity!"

Nick stalled for time. He wanted a moment to think. He took another step toward the table and smiled at Pendragon. Smiled with his lips. His eyes were ice cubes. "I'm curious," he told the man. "Which button was it?"

Pendragon pointed to a red button set apart from the others. "That one. It would have launched the missiles, but for you."

Nick studied him. "Would you really have launched them?"

A long silence. Pendragon cupped his sharp chin in his hand and stared back at Nick. "I don't really know. Perhaps—perhaps not. I am not a bloodthirsty man. But the Russians must be destroyed and—yes, I think I would have launched them! For the ultimate good of humanity. A terrible means to a good end!"

Nick's voice was very soft, hardly audible in the round chamber. "She would have launched them without any soul searching! She was bloodthirsty!"

"Yes." Pendragon sighed. "She was a great mistake, but I could not bear to have her killed. She was too lovely. She was my Achilles heel."

Ian Travers' very words.

Pendragon looked up at Nick. "She told me you were dead, you

know. She said you had been killed on the train. I'm afraid it was one of the few times I believed her. I, we all, let our guard down a bit after that. A fatal misapprehension, as it turned out."

Nick's grin was mirthless. "I'm like Mark Twain—reports of my death are often greatly exaggerated."

"Yes. I can understand." Pendragon sighed loudly. "Well, there is no point in all this, sir. Will you let me kill myself? I promise you I shall do it quickly and neatly."

Nick decided. He took the Luger from the black sling and took out the clip. He jacked a single bullet into the chamber.

"Why not? You're right, it will save a lot of bother. I don't care how you get dead—as long as you do." He slid the Luger across the shiny table to the man in the wheelchair. "Be my guest. Only make it quick, huh? I've got a date later tonight."

Pendragon stared down at the Luger. The stripped down 9mm weapon was polished to a high gloss. Parts of the bluing had worn off to reveal the white virgin metal. Pendragon looked at it with fascination, then finally he picked it up. He pointed it directly at Nick's chest.

"I am a little disappointed in you," he said. "That you should turn out to be almost as much a romantic fool as I am! Oh, I'm going to kill myself! I must! I'll find another way. But first I am going to kill you, Mr. Carter!"

He pulled the trigger.

The slug knocked Nick back four paces. He staggered, then got his balance again. He walked slowly to within six feet of Pendragon and stopped. The man was staring at him, mouth open, his golden eyes filled with more surprise and curiosity than fear.

"Plastic body armor," said Nick. "I think it was made in one of your own plants." And threw the stiletto.

Chapter 14

BED AND BREAKFAST

At the southernmost tip of Dorset, when the weather is good, the twilight is long even in November. It is a country of lush rolling downs and soft not unpleasant mists. The cuckoos cry among the mustard fields, their plangent note encompassing, as Hugh Walpole once put it, all the love and sorrow in the world.

In the snug little village of Burton Bradstock, not far out of Bridport where young King Charles once cowered for his life, there is an ancient inn called The Dove. It is very old and sits not two hundreds yards from the Channel. Smugglers used the inn in the old times and today their descendants, in gaiters and baggy corduroys, sit in the common room and fill it with their soft Dorsetshire speech. A sign in the window of the inn advertises Bed and Breakfast.

The little two seater ploughed up the narrow muddy lane and stopped before the inn. Nick looked at the sign and said to the girl beside him, "What more could we ask? Bed and breakfast—and plenty of brown October ale. Shall we try it?"

Gwen Leith's face was pink. Some of it was natural enough—she had rested in a nursing home for three days—and she was her old self even to the fresh outdoor complexion. But sun and wind could not altogether be blamed for her pinkness now. Without meeting Nick's eyes she said, "Y—yes, I suppose so. It looks very nice."

Nick Carter laughed. A good free laugh. The thing was over and he felt fine—his arm was still in a sling but healing fast—and it was a time for letting down. He had wangled two weeks leave from a reluctant Hawk.

Now he climbed out of the little car and helped the girl. She was again wearing a short skirt and her bronzed knees flashed at him as she climbed out. "I remember," said Nick with mock solemnity, "the first time I ever saw those knees. I nearly forgot the mission!"

"Nick!" She was only half smiling, her wide mouth quirked in doubtful seriousness at him. She was wearing a little tam aslant the red hair, which had gathered droplets of mist as they drove. They sparkled like diamonds now against that flaming cap.

"Sorry." Nick grinned, then swept her into his arms and kissed her on the perky nose.

"Nick—please." She freed herself, but the smile had won now. "People will see. Look at them, those yokels, all staring out at us!"

“Envious, that’s all! Jealous.” He took her arm and steered her toward the inn. “We’ll leave the luggage for mine host. Let’s go investigate the bed and breakfast deal. Right now, I’ll admit, I’m more interested in bed than breakfast.”

Gwen’s complexion got pinker. But she took his arm and followed him into the inn.

They were alone at last in the little low eaved room and Nick was kissing her. They sat on the edge of the bed, both fully clothed. Nicholas Huntington Carter was being very restrained and gentle. So gentle that he was a bit surprised at himself.

Gwen’s lips were soft and sweet and loathe to break away from his. At first she had been stiff, uneasy, but now her sturdy body was compliant against his rugged maleness. When at last they broke the kiss—it was that or suffocate —Nick said, “Well, this is certainly an improvement! I’ve got you alone and I’m toucMng you. And you haven’t screamed or jumped through the ceiling yet.”

She buried her face in his chest. “I—I was going to tell you about that.”

Nick lay back and lit a cigarette. “Yes. I believe you were. So give.”

“I will. Only don’t look at me. I—I can’t tell it if you do.”

“Strange creature. Okay, I won’t look.” He closed his eyes.

She began to whisper. “I wanted you the moment I saw you, Nick! Even at a time like that. It was terrible. I’m terrible! I—I’m not cold or afraid of men. Sometimes I wish I were. But I’m just the opposite—sometimes I nearly burn up if the right man touches me! I have to watch myself every minute or I do crazy things, I have to be on guard all the time. It—it’s terrible to be the way I am!”

“Not terrible. I like you the way you are, honey.” A thought struck him and he frowned slightly. “But how about this guy you’re engaged to—the one you preferred to all the supermen? What happened to him?”

“That was a lie. There isn’t any one. I—I just made that up to help keep you at a distance—for my own sake.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask about Jim Stockes —what their relationship had been? He dismissed it instantly. None of his business!

Nick opened his eyes and smiled at her. It was what Hawk had once called his “devastating” smile.

Gwen Leith stared at him for a long moment. Then she flung herself on top of him, laughing. “You fool! You utter fool. I love you!”

Nick pulled his mouth away from hers long enough to complain. “But how can I tell?”

She pressed him down on the bed, her big firm breasts crushed against his chest. She giggled.

“If you’re nice to me, very nice! Really nice! I just might let you know.”

And she did.